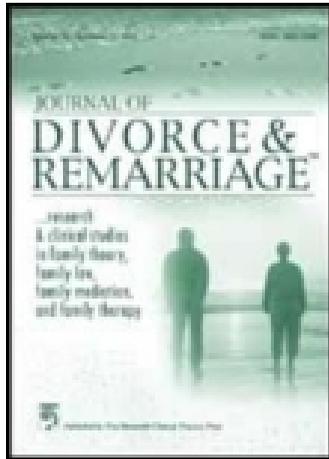


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### Supporting Blended Families to Remain Intact: A Case Study

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## Supporting Blended Families to Remain Intact: A Case Study

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*More than 40% of U.S. adults have at least one step-relative in their family. Whereas there is much research on providing support for ex-partners and their children, there has been a lesser focus on trying to keep newly blended families intact. Because many members of a failed relationship repartner and have children from these new relationships, we find there is a need to provide support for stepfamilies. The Survival Strategies Workshop provides advice on strategies for blended families. In this article, we illustrate, through the use of case studies, that most of the problems occurring in blended families are not unique and if appropriate strategies are followed the prospect of a happy future is greatly enhanced.*

**KEYWORDS** *family dispute resolution, parenting advice, stepfamilies*

Pollet (2010) claimed that statistics reveal that approximately 50% of U.S. marriages end in divorce. Further, 60% of U.S. second marriages end in divorce, and about 43% of marriages are remarriages for at least one party. She claimed that although the statistics vary, estimates are that “as many as one in three American children now can expect to spend some of their childhood years living with a step-parent” (p. 529).

Earlier research by Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) noted that at that time approximately 25% of the 3.7 million cohabitating couples<sup>1</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> By cohabitating couples, we mean couples living together, whether married or not.

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the United States were households in which at least one adult brought children from prior relationships, thereby creating cohabitating stepfamily households. Wineberg and McCarthy (1998) noted that cohabitating couples are more likely (48% vs. 37%) to enter a new union with children from previous relationships than are remarried couples. Some first marriages create stepfamilies and stepparent–stepchild relationships (i.e., when never-married mothers marry a man who is not the child’s father).

Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet (1995) claimed that one third of U.S. children will live in a remarried or cohabitating stepfamily household before they reach adulthood. In fact, children in stepfamilies might have lived in several types of families before they reach adulthood, although fewer than 5% of all remarried couples incorporate three sets of children (i.e., yours, mine, and ours). Complex marital and cohabitating histories over the life course result in complex family histories for children and for adults (O’Connor, Pickering, Dunn, Golding, & the ALSPAC Study Team, 1999). For example, about 40% of adult women will at some time likely reside as a parent or stepparent in a remarried or cohabitating stepfamily household.

According to demographic information collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 2000 census, there were a “total of 4.4 million ‘stepchildren of householders’ in the United States in 2000; 3.3 million of these stepchildren were under eighteen years of age” (Pollet, 2010, p. 529). It has been noted that the number of stepchildren reported is under inclusive in that “the number includes ‘step-children of the householder’ but omits step-children of the householder’s spouse living in their home.” Thus how stepparents and stepchildren interact is an important issue for the welfare of U.S. families.

More recent data from the Pew Research Center’s work on social and demographic trends (Pew Research Center, 2011) indicates that in October 2010,<sup>2</sup> more than 4 in 10 U.S. adults have at least one step-relative in their family—either a stepparent, a step- or half-sibling, or a stepchild. People with steprelatives are just as likely as others to say that family is the most important element of their life. However, they typically feel a stronger sense of obligation to their biological family members (be it a parent, a child, or a sibling) than to their steprelatives, the survey found.

In an Australian study, Qu and Weston (2005) stated that approximately 1 in 10 families that include a couple contain resident stepchildren. In Wave 3 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey, 13% of households had either residential or nonresidential stepchildren.

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<sup>2</sup> It says that U.S. government statistics on stepfamilies are limited. For instance, estimates of the numbers of stepfamilies from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey are based on information about the householder’s coresiding steprelatives only. Cases where a household member other than the householder has a steprelative and cases where steprelatives are living in a separate household are excluded from the count.

## SOME BLENDED FAMILY CASE STUDIES

Blended families come in many forms with some common examples as follows: married couples in which one or both spouses have children from a previous relationship, families with children who are in a subsequent marriage that have children from a previous relationship, and families with children whose spouses have children from a previous relationship (Cartwright & Gibson 2013).

To provide us with a better understanding of the diversity and complex relationships in blended families, we introduce four case studies of commonly encountered families. They are used to illustrate the theory and practice discussed later in the article.

## Study 1

Simon (52) and Karen (42) now have a fully blended family: Samuel (Karen's biological child and the oldest of the five), Sally (Simon's biological child), and the three children of their union, Lily, Rose, and Louis. Simon's ex-partner is in a long-term relationship with Gerard. They have no joint children, nor does Gerard have any biological children. Karen's ex-partner Henry has married Margaret. Henry and Margaret have no children from their union; however, Margaret has a son from a previous relationship.

## Study 2

Phillip (38) and his partner Samantha (26) have two children: James (6) and Steve (4). They live in a detached house and Phillip's terminally ill father resides in a granny flat behind them. They have Phillip's children Paul (11) and Henry (13) from his first relationship living with them 50% of the time.

## Study 3

Samantha (50) and Lisa (40) were both previously married and have three (Ashley [17], Thomas [14], and Joseph [12]) and two children (Samson [8] and Eve [6]), respectively, from these relationships. Although they have a close physical and emotional relationship and spend many nights and weekends together, they still have two separate households. Levin (2004) defined this as *living apart together*.<sup>3</sup> The ex-husband of Samantha, Ian, has a new partner,

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<sup>3</sup> As Levin (2004) argued that some decades ago "non-marital cohabitation began to appear in the western world as a new social institution. 'Living apart together'—the LAT relationship—is a more recent phenomenon, which seems to have the potential of becoming the third stage in the process of the social transformation of intimacy. In contrast to couples in 'commuting marriages,' who have one main household in common, couples living in LAT relationships have one household each" (p. 238).

Tina. There are no children from Ian's new relationship, nor does Tina have children from other relationships.

#### Study 4

William (38) and Jane (35) were in a relationship for 15 years and had two boys, Peter (10) and Richard (14). Jane has repartnered and has a daughter Amanda (18 months). William has repartnered with Mary, who has two sons, Tom (11) and Wayne (14), from a previous relationship.

Table 1 indicates some of the complexity of these cases being considered in this article. Later, we indicate how the processes developed at Berwick Family Relationship Centre can be used to best manage these cases.

Graham (2010), in examining how the stepparent role is defined and negotiated in stepfamilies in New Zealand, noted, "The past few decades have witnessed an increased level of attention given to stepfamilies and their value in raising children successfully. Earlier studies were largely focused on whether children in stepfamilies were at greater risk for experiencing adjustment difficulties when compared to children in first or sole parent families" (p. 18).

Most of the research on children and stepparenting has focused on the relationships between parents who are no longer cohabitating and their children. Significant longitudinal research on this topic has been conducted in California by Wallerstein and her colleagues (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007, 2009; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Packer Rosenthal, 2013).

Emery (2012) showed that a more cooperative approach to negotiating parenting issues can benefit parents and children not only in the short term, but even more so in the long run. Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, and Dillon (2001) conducted an empirical study that showed the benefits of mediation (as compared to litigation) for stepparents.

As Gonzales (2009) wrote:

If merely defining a blended (or separated) family is confusing enough, consider then the thoughts and feelings of those in the middle of this new situation. It is a collision of two universes, with the hopes that these two will form one new one. One of the biggest mistakes people make, however, is underestimating the impact this "joining" will have. Children are either forced to move into a new house, or must accept into what was once "their" home a new and strange person (or persons) who is not their previous parent. This, however, is the simpler task, because there is only the stepparent to get used to.

A much more complicated endeavour involves two sets of children who must now get to know or at least learn how to live with their new siblings in addition to their new parents. Of course, this only describes the

**TABLE 1** Four Stepfamily Cases Discussed in This Article

Attributes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Number and ages of children from each partner	Simon: Sally (15), Lily (9), Rose (7), Louis (1) Karen: Samuel (17), Lily (9), Rose (7), Louis (1)	Phillip: Henry (13), Paul (11), James (6), Steven (4) Samantha: James (6), Steven (4)	Samantha: Ashley (17), Thomas (14), Joseph (12) Lisa: Samson (8), Eve (6)	William: Richard (14), Peter (10) Jane: Amanda (18 months), Richard (14), Peter (10) Mary: Wayne (14), Tom (11)
Length between relationships	Simon: 4 years Karen: 4 years	Phillip: 2 years	Samantha: 6 years Lisa: 2 years	William: 4 years Jane: 4 years
Length of current relationship	10 years	8 years	2 years	2 years
Is there a parenting alliance with ex-partners?	No	No	No for Samantha, yes for Lisa	Yes
What are the arrangements for spending time with ex-partners for all children?	Sally: 3 nights every second weekend and half school holidays with Simon Samuel: As his father lives out of state, he visits his father twice a year	Henry and Paul are in 50–50 shared care	Ashley: Lives 100% of his time with Ian. Thomas and Joseph: Spend 3 nights every second weekend with Ian Samson and Eve: 50–50 shared care	In dispute
Has there been any family violence?	No	Yes	No	No
Is grandparent input an issue?	Yes	No	Yes	No

difficulties of transitioning to new surroundings (even if they were once familiar) and forming new relationships. It does not include other major issues such as dealing with feelings surrounding their parents' separation, the death of one of parent, or the choice one parent made to remarry (depending on the circumstances).

Clearly, the blending of families is a complicated and troubling endeavour. (p. 149)

Sweeney (2010) conducted an in-depth survey of remarriage and stepfamilies in the 21st century. She noted that stepfamilies are diverse with respect to their structures, processes, and outcomes. She argued there is new research with respect to understanding and documenting sources of stepfamily heterogeneity, particularly with respect to cohabitating stepfamilies, and further attention needs to be placed on stepfamily relationships that span multiple households or involve part-time household membership, stepmother families and children's relationships with nonresident mothers and resident biological fathers, stepfamilies formed after a nonmarital birth, and stepfamilies headed by same-sex couples. Further attention is also needed to variation in stepfamily experiences across groups defined by age, gender, race, ethnicity, or social class.

Cartwright (2010) conducted an exploratory investigation of the preparation couples undertake prior to stepfamily living. Ninety-nine stepfamily adults living in New Zealand completed an online questionnaire about the courtship period. The results suggest that couples are motivated to repartner by needs for an intimate relationship and associated benefits, although economic and resource issues precipitated cohabitation for some. Many participants had awareness of potential stepfamily challenges. However, the majority did not talk to partners about parenting issues, or how to manage the change for children, supporting earlier findings that stepfamily couples avoid communicating about difficult issues.

#### THE NEED FOR ORGANIZING STEPPARENTING WORKSHOPS AT BERWICK FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRE

Kelly (2013) indicated in a special issue of *Family Court Review* on Australian family relationship centers, that the development of such centers and the enabling legislation is a richly informative and timely presentation of a bold family law reform initiative for providing integrated, community-based, and nonadversarial services to separating and divorcing parents with child-related disputes. She claimed that family relationship centers, the centrepiece of the 2006 reforms, provide a first point of entry with a highly integrated matrix of information, referral, and service options, complemented by national advice and legal information resources for parents.

Kelly (2013) claimed that “an evaluation of the objectives of the reform legislation indicated a 32% reduction in filings with the Family Court of Australia over five years, increased use of the Family Relationship Centres, reduced use of lawyers for parenting disputes, and significant reduction in costs to the Government for services” (p. 278).

As a major step in the Family Law Reforms of 2006, a series of 65 family relationship centers were funded to provide information, advice, and dispute resolution to help people reach agreement on parenting arrangements without going to court. Parkinson (2013) claimed:

Family Relationship Centres formed the centrepiece of major reforms to the family law system in Australia which were introduced from 2006 onwards. They provide information and advice and offer free or heavily subsidised mediation of parenting disputes. They are an early intervention strategy to help parents manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart in the aftermath of separation, and are intended to lead to significant cultural change in the resolution of post-separation parenting disputes. They also play a role in strengthening intact family relationships (mainly through advice and referral). . . . While FRCs have many roles, a key purpose is as an early intervention initiative to help parents work out post-separation parenting arrangements and manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart. (p. 195)

As part of its goal to provide early intervention initiatives to help parents work out postseparation parenting arrangements and manage the transition from parenting together to parenting apart, the Berwick Family Relationship Centre<sup>4</sup> feels it important to provide advice about stepparenting. The definition of a stepfamily is a partnership with at least one adult having a child or children from a previous relationship—either through biology, history, or intentionality. It can be informal or formal. Adults can live together or apart and children can live with them full time, visit, or be absent.

Second marriages are known to be more fragile than first marriages: In the United States, 40% of remarriages occurring between 1985 and 1994 ended in permanent separation or divorce within 10 years, as compared with 32% of first marriages (Bumpass & Raley, 2007). Clark and Crompton (2006) argued that the presence of stepchildren is a prime contributor to the collapse of second marriages. They claimed that teenagers, in particular, can put any marital bond to the test. Coleman, Ganong, and Fine (2000) found that stepchildren are a prime factor in remarriage failure.

In Canada, nationally representative surveys show that the probability that the parents of children born into stepfamilies would separate before the children were 10 years old is three times higher than for children born

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<sup>4</sup> See Relationships Australia (2014) for details about the Berwick Family Relationship Centre and Relationships Australia Victoria, which administers the center.

into intact two-parent families (Juby, Le Bourdais, and Marcil-Gratton, 2001). Despite the fact that there is a greater risk that stepfamilies will separate—with the negative consequences that this entails—little research has been conducted on this topic (Teachman, 2008). Teachman (2008) noted:

Having children with other men substantially raises the risk of divorce for women. The fact that the same is not necessarily true for men (e.g., the lack of a relationship between the husband's children living in the family and marital disruption) indicates the gendered nature of life course complexities. He concludes that gender sets the context within which life course patterns are evaluated and subsequently exerts influence on second marriages. (p. 303)

In Australia, family dispute resolution practitioners are not so much concerned with the number of marriages and divorces, as they are with relationship breakdowns and the outcomes for the children of these failed relationships. Exact figures on how many children live in blended families are difficult to obtain, because as an Australian Institute of Family Studies report indicates, “in many step and blended families the partners cohabit rather than remarry” (de Vaus, 2004, p. 180). Statistics indicate that 30% of first marriages and 60% of second marriages end in divorce. The statistics are probably higher when you take into account the growing amount of couples who are in de facto relationships. One in three marriages is now a remarriage and one in five children will grow up in a stepfamily.

In Australia, 76% of homeless teens come from step- and sole-parent families. According to a U.S. Senate report (*Homeless youth*, 1980), only 30% of homeless youth come from intact families. Pryor (2013) reported on an exploratory research project that sought to better understand how to prevent homelessness in Tasmania, Australia. When asked about their transitions into homelessness, all of the young people cited family breakdown as a direct cause of homelessness. Thus research indicates that enhancing the quality of stepparenting can reduce the amount of youth homelessness.

Victoria has 15 family relationship centers, of which Relationships Australia Victoria is the lead consortium partner in four. The Berwick Family Relationship Centre, one of these four, is located in Berwick in the city of Casey. Providing family mediation advice for the city of Casey is a challenging task. Casey is a diverse and rapidly growing community that has the most residents of any municipality in Victoria. It is the third fastest growing municipality in Victoria, with a current population (as of June 2014) of approximately 281,000, with a projected population of 459,000 by 2036. A total of 12.9% of Casey residents aged 15 years and over hold bachelor's or higher degree qualifications, compared to a figure of 23.6% for the greater Melbourne area, and 26.7% of Casey residents were born in non-English-speaking countries (City of Casey, 2014).

## THE STEPFAMILY SURVIVAL STRATEGIES PROGRAM AT BERWICK FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CENTRE

We now examine what strategies can be helpful for stepparents in blended families. Although these strategies are being developed for clients of Berwick Family Relationship Centre, there is no reason why similar approaches cannot be adapted for use outside Australia. Of course, such procedures need to be adapted to take into consideration local laws and cultural norms. The strategies developed are ones that parents and stepparents use in dealing with their children, rather than how they relate to their ex-partners.

Gonzales (2009) pointed out that the literature on therapeutic approaches to blended families yields very little. Michaels (2000) created the Step-family Enrichment Program, which uses a multicouple group approach aimed at helping stepfamilies with the process of family formation. Exploring perceptions of stepparents in therapy, Visher, Visher, and Pasley (1997) found that nearly half of all participants reported that therapy was not helpful, citing lack of therapist knowledge and expertise about stepfamilies as the number one reason. Therapist awareness of the unique needs of remarrying couples was also advocated by Michaels (2007), who noted that effective treatment requires knowledge of these exceptional challenges.

Gonzales (2009) argued that although some aspects of family therapy might apply to blended families, the two are in actuality quite distinctly different. One pitfall a therapist can fall into is failing to recognize and fully appreciate the scope of this difference. Gonzalez claimed that at the present, very little exists to exclusively address blended families or provide concrete interventions that serve to make this collision of two worlds a smoother endeavour.

Hurwitz (1997) claimed that “One of the biggest issues facing blended families is the lack of available resources and absence of cultural rules and guidelines. Essentially, blended families are left with no idea of what to expect and how to deal with the problems they face” (p. 3).

Gonzales (2009) claimed:

Becoming a blended family is like setting off on a long trek into the wilderness. Being prepared is one of the most critical components of such an undertaking. Although knowing a little about what to expect and being armed with as many of the anticipated necessities as possible does not guarantee a successful journey, one can only imagine what a lack of these things will likely lead to. (p. 150)

He thus introduced the concept of *preblended family counseling*. It is made up of four main stages:

1. Discovery. Shalay and Brownlee (2007) stated that the complexities of new relationships can put newly blended families at risk for dissolution.

Therefore, family members are guided to get to know one another and make initial bonding attempts. Most family members are likely to know a decent amount about one another, but the degree can vary greatly. In addition, blended families do not have the luxury of time, which in traditional families allows members to get to know each other through experience, trial and error, and observation.

2. Educational. The most important educational piece involves teaching families what to expect as they seek to become one family. Becoming a blended family is not easy; Kaufman (1993) claimed that all combined families are born of loss. It should, however, be noted that as more people decide to have children on their own as a matter of choice, we will see lossless blended families as they choose to partner up afterward.
3. Parental unification. Generally the parental couple faces the most challenges. The parents of a newly formed blended family are often just as confused as other family members and much more overwhelmed. They face the dual tasks of making the relationship with their new partner work and helping to shape and mold two separate entities into one family unit. These tasks are often made even more difficult because of a lack of parental unification. Essentially, parental unification refers to shared rules and expectations, as well as some agreement on discipline. Parental unification also involves an overall agreement on parenting style. Halford, Nicholson, and Sanders (2007) found that compared to first-time marrying couples, stepfamily couples tended to withdraw more from couple discussions, which “might reflect difficult issues such as negotiating parenting roles within step-families—especially discipline” (p. 481).
4. Family unification. This stage deals with more pragmatic issues, such as the feelings of family members regarding their new family (fears, hopes, expectations, etc.), what home life will be like, and the establishment of family conferences. Just as the parents are given a time and place to discuss their feelings on being a parent in a blended family, children should be given the same opportunity to openly share their feelings on becoming a blended family. At this point, family members are encouraged not to interject or interrupt another member, but to merely listen attentively and allow members to have their feelings validated.

Gonzales’s (2009) preblended family counseling can last up to 10 sessions. At Berwick Family Relationship Centre, practitioners only have 2 to 3 hours to run a workshop on stepfamily survival strategies. The program is based on a course, “Making Stepfamilies Work,” conducted by the Drummond Street Family Centre (Drummond Street Services, 2014) and the practical book of Howden (2004). The major differences between the Berwick Family Relationship Centre and Drummond Street Family Centre offerings is that the Berwick Family Relationship Centre focuses on relationships between

(step)parents and children (as stated previously) rather than between parents (the more traditional approach) and that the Drummond Street Family Centre runs a 6-week course.

The session at Berwick Family Relationship Centre focuses on practical experiences rather than being grounded in theory. The practitioners are all Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners,<sup>5</sup> whose major role is to help families (in the widest possible sense) resolve disputes about children, focusing primarily on the paramount interests of the children. Generally the number of attendees at each session is small (four or five couples, not necessarily of opposite genders, and the occasional individual). At least one person in the couple has a relationship with children who are not biologically their children. The session is not run as a lecture, but as a series of discussions and activities. The presenter commences by drawing a family tree and then asks the couples to use dolls to represent their own families. From this follows a series of discussions and sharing of experiences incorporating some of Gonzales's ideas. Attendees are discouraged from taking notes, allowing them to focus their full concentration on the workshop. The notes are e-mailed after the session.

The practitioners at Berwick Family Relationship Centre wish to ensure that parents have more awareness of the reality of stepfamilies and a sense of not being alone, by meeting others in stepfamilies. The program allows the (step)parents attending to share their experiences. The four case studies mentioned earlier are discussed in more detail later.

The practitioners also hope to strengthen the participants' relationship as parents in a stepfamily. They attempt to do this by discussing with (step)parents respectful communication and conflict resolution techniques. They highlight that it is incredibly important to have respectful communication where everyone in the family feels emotionally and physically safe. Communication in stepfamilies is vitally important due to the added complexity of relationships that can lead to divisions along biological lines.

They stress that conflict is necessary and healthy in relationships, but that parties should engage in fair rather than dirty fighting. *Fair fighting* involves sticking to the issue at hand, being empathetic, and choosing an appropriate time and place to bring up grievances. Examples of *dirty fighting* include violence, insults, withholding love and rewards, and using sweeping statements. The practitioners try to encourage win-win scenarios and resolution rather than escalation.

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<sup>5</sup> An accredited Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner meets specific standards contained in the Australian Family Law (Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners Regulations) 2008. They are certified by the Australian Attorney General and normally require to have studied some law, psychology, social work, conflict management, mediation, or dispute resolution subjects.

They ask the (step)-parents to acknowledge the impact of the past and the effect that it has on the children. Stepfamilies are primarily constructed after major losses. It is vital for parents to acknowledge their children's losses. The parents need to respectfully consider which traditions from the past family should be maintained and what new rituals can be incorporated in the newly blended family.

Practitioners encourage parents in a blended family to reach agreement on how they will discipline children in the blended family. Leman (1994) stated that "according to many family specialists, discipline of the children is the number one issue in the blended family" (p. 208). Unfortunately, most parents in blended families find themselves in trouble because they have not (or have not fully) discussed how to deal with discipline in the household.

The practitioners discuss parents' fears, ambitions, hopes, and dislikes about their upcoming role as parents in the blended family. Parents discuss ground rules for discipline. Suggested guidelines include starting with each parent disciplining their own children and making a gradual transition. Once the parents have worked out their own guidelines, they have a family conference allowing the children to have a voice. This leads to everyone in the family having ownership of the new guidelines. Importantly, it also confirms to the children that the parents are unified.

The practitioners ask parents to keep discussions with ex-partners civil, respectful, and business-like, and restricted to practical issues about their children. Children should never be used as messengers between the parents. The practitioners suggest that parents should share information about their children with their ex-partners and inform the ex-partners about any impending cohabitation, rather than having them find out through the children.

The practitioners conclude by discussing parenting roles and providing tips for stepparents. They stress that developing relationships with your stepchildren will inevitably lead to better relationships within the whole family and especially your new partner.

1. Stepparenting relationships take time: Respect is all you can expect initially, but warmth and love can develop eventually.
2. It is important to develop a strong relationship with your stepchildren before you discipline them.
3. Seek out opportunities to spend time with your stepchildren away from the biological parent.
4. Stepparents must never attempt to replace the biological parent. Nor should they make any negative comments about the other biological parent in front of the children.

Biological parents are encouraged to do the following:

1. Create a balance between the needs of their children and those of their partner.
2. Support the stepparent when dealing with your children.
3. Develop routines and chores for your children to encourage a feeling of belonging within the stepfamily, no matter the length of time they are with you.
4. Avoid being a “Disneyland parent.” Spend time with your children engaged in everyday activities.

## SOME STEPFAMILY CASE STUDIES

### Study 1

We recount four incidents from this family.

#### AT THE WEDDING OF SIMON AND KAREN

Sally was pulling at Simon’s pants during his wedding speech. Karen was angry at Sally trying to derail the wedding and seek the limelight. Six years later Lily was pulling at Simon’s pants during Samuel’s confirmation. Rather than being angry, Karen thought this incident was very cute. This illustrates that biological parents look at their children through rose-colored glasses, whereas stepparents look at them through binoculars.

#### WHEN KAREN WAS PREGNANT WITH LOUIS

For the 6 months that Sally knew about the pregnancy, she did not speak to Karen. Karen found this incident very difficult to deal with, so she decided to vent her frustrations on Simon. Simon was exceedingly grateful that Karen had not been angry at Sally and was incredibly supportive of helping Karen through the situation, an example of Simon engaging in a win–win scenario. It was a mutual gain over personal victory.

#### SAMUEL AND MARGARET

After the first time that Samuel returned home from visiting his father in Adelaide, he proudly stated that he would like his father’s new partner Margaret to be his new mummy. Karen was initially distraught, but she eventually realized that it was good for Samuel to feel happy and content when he visits his father and that she had nothing to be concerned about. This illustrates why it is important for biological parents to give their children

permission to have good relationships with their stepparents. It is important to let children know that they should not feel guilty or disloyal if they have good relationships with their stepparents. Interestingly, 25 years down the track, Samuel has a better relationship with Margaret than he has with his biological father.

#### KAREN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SIMON'S MOTHER

Karen found it very difficult that Simon's mother (Helen) did not accept Samuel into her family. She did not buy Samuel birthday presents nor invite him to her house. She often stated that he was not her biological grandchild. These incidents were very worrying to Simon, Karen, and the five children of their union. The situation only improved when Karen realized (based on Simon's behavior) that the primary relationship was between Simon and herself and not Simon and his mother and that Simon was doing his best to ensure that all children felt valued and included as family members.

#### Study 2

Samantha is not coping with the four children of the two relationships. Phillip cannot provide more parenting support as the new family is financially challenged and he has to work at two jobs.

Helen was drug and alcohol addicted and barely managed to care for her two biological children 50% of the time. Due to her drug abuse, she had a history of violence toward Phillip. Phillip sought a family dispute resolution conference between himself and Helen seeking to change the arrangements so that he would only see the older children every second weekend. Helen was incapable of providing any more care for her children. Phillip confided in the practitioner that if the current situation continued it would be the end of his second relationship. The Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner suggested to Phillip and Samantha that they should attend the stepparenting program. After learning that she held unrealistic expectations for stepfamilies, Samantha felt empowered enough to persist with the situation.

#### Study 3

Ashley has been engaging in dangerous activities, including drug abuse and truancy from school. Samantha and Lisa's same-sex relationship has been very confrontational for Samantha's three boys and their maternal grandparents. Ian has been very disparaging regarding Samantha's lesbian relationship, causing much turmoil for his three sons. Because of his behavior, especially toward Samantha, and his denigration of Samantha's same-sex relationship, Ashley now lives with Ian 100% of the time and refuses to see his mother. The course leader at Berwick Family Relationship Centre

has encouraged Samantha not to engage in conflict with Ian. She suggested that Ian should be informed that Samantha is involved in a LAT relationship, rather than hearing it from the boys. Encouraging Samantha and Lisa to acknowledge the grieving processes the children are going through and having Samantha acknowledge the difficult issues that the boys are facing is also important.

#### Study 4

During the mediation Jane admitted that her new partner was sometimes “gruff” with his stepchildren. Peter was refusing to visit his father due to the behavior of the stepmother’s sons and the stepmother (Mary). Peter was also traumatized by the conflict between his father (William) and his stepmother, for which he felt he was the primary cause. This situation arose because his father had rewarded him with a can of soda for helping in the garden. Mary was livid because there was a rule in the new household that none of the children should have soft drinks except at dinner time.

What ensued was that the father told his two sons to ride their bikes up to the paternal grandparents’ house, which was nearby. Soon after, William packed his bags and moved to his parents’ house. He said to his 10-year-old, “I don’t know what is going on. Don’t tell your mother anything.” The next day the mother received a phone call from Peter’s teacher, very concerned because he was visibly traumatized—feeling loyalty to his father and not being able to share his concerns. Prior to the father repartnering, the parents had a cordial relationship. Even now, William often goes to Jane’s house to spend time with the boys. After this incident, Jane was so incensed at both the father and stepmother’s behavior that she immediately called Berwick Family Relationship Centre asking for stepfamily advice. William is a gentle man who is stuck between his old and new families, a situation that is making both families unhappy.

After attending the stepfamily workshop William and Mary were able to discuss their family’s discipline strategies together. They understood the difficulties faced by children and the losses the boys had gone through when their father repartnered with Mary. They were both much better armed to deal with the situations and the entailing conflicts.

The four case studies provide important examples of following the tips mentioned previously.

## EVALUATION

Because of limited resources, and the fact that the focus at Berwick Family Relationship Centre is on providing dispute resolution support for parents in conflict, the evaluation of the step-parenting support session is necessarily

limited. At the conclusion of the workshop, questions are asked about the quality of the course and the presenter. Of more significance for this research, however, are questions on what the attendees learned and what further knowledge they required.

The attendees at the session agreed that they had learned many things including the following:

1. A better understanding of the trials all stepparents face.
2. The need to chill—to be more patient and understanding toward the children adapting to the new environment.
3. Children are not worse off in a stepfamily environment.
4. Don't take things to heart about what the stepchildren say when they are angry; be patient and don't take things personally.
5. The information in the workshop gave parents more insight into the problems they faced and helped improve communication between the parents and between the parents and children.

Participants also claimed that the following activities would be useful:

1. More hands-on activities.
2. Follow-up sessions in 6 to 12 months or indeed a continuation of such sessions.

One very important point learned from the program is that it is most effective when the course leaders have personal experience of stepfamilies and are able to share their experiences with attendees. Although skilled practitioners can explain current theory and practice, workshop attendees greatly value the sharing of experiences provided by most practitioners. People in stepfamilies love interacting with others who have shared the same situation.

Also of interest is that stepfamily concerns cut across socioeconomic and cultural lines—the issues discussed here are of concern to all stepfamilies. Most important, the quicker most people realize that they have unrealistic expectations of life in a stepfamily, the easier it will be to create harmony in the blended family.

## CONCLUSION

Advice about stepparenting strategies can help blended families avoid the distress of further conflict and breakdowns. We have noted that although Australian family dispute resolution centers are primarily focused on the resolution of disputes between parents, they also have an educational role to help their clients avoid future disputes. As many of their clients have children from new relationships, it is vital for them to provide stepparenting

advice to parents who have required mediation support for the breakdown of their previous relationship. This advice can help avoid future relationship breakdown and conflict.<sup>6</sup>

By meeting others in stepfamilies, the workshop ensures that parents have more awareness of the reality of stepfamilies and a sense of not being alone. It also strengthens the relationship between parents in a blended family. This occurs by discussing with (step)parents respectful communication and conflict resolution techniques. Parents are asked to acknowledge the impact of the past and the effect that it has on the children. Parenting roles are examined and tips for stepparents are provided.

A fundamental principle behind the workshop discussions is that developing relationships with clients' stepchildren will inevitably lead to better relationships within the whole family and especially between the partners. These relationships take time; respect is all one can expect initially but warmth and love can develop eventually.

We also advise that step-parents must never attempt to replace the biological parent, nor should they make any negative comments about the other biological parent in front of the children.

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<sup>6</sup> One client of the Berwick Family Relationship Centre has seven children from five different relationships. Negotiating child welfare arrangements in this case is very complex. Helping parents avoid further relationship breakdowns, by understanding the complexities of blended families, is of vital importance.

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