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How Do You Learn How to be a Step-parent or Stepchild?

Indecision is like the step-child; if he doesn't wash his hands he is called dirty; if he does, he is wasting the water — Madagascan Proverb.

MY own interest in issues of step-parenting has two inter-related aspects. As an educational psychologist, I am naturally interested in ways in which a child's development in and out of school is influenced by family relationships. In addition I also happen to be a stepfather, and I am grateful to my stepsons for 'getting under my professional skin' to pose a number of practical — and often highly emotive — questions about families, the nature of relationships and interdependence of the needs of parents, step-parents and children.

One of the fundamental questions raised was 'where do you look for the answers to questions about stepfamily life?' My jumble sale edition of Dr Spock was about as useful as his pointy-eared namesake in providing guidelines for the demarcation disputes, and complications (and the feelings they aroused) that I was experiencing as a step-parent. Most people probably draw on their personal experience as a child of being 'parented' as providing some sort of model for their own subsequent role as a parent. Richard Whitfield in *Education for Family Life* points out that even if we do not copy those models directly they are nevertheless 'at the periphery of awareness'. They also include a range of values and attitudes which may be adhered to, or rebelled against, at particular stages of development.

However, a step family is different in a number of important respects. It is linked to and influenced by the existence of another family containing the natural parent of at least one of the children. Regardless of whether or not there is actual contact there will be an inevitable form of relationship with that other parent and family. The amount of contact probably determines the extent to which the relationship is reality based. Most step-parents will be entering a situation where they have no personal experience to draw on, and which may even clash with some of their fundamental value systems about the nature of families, children, parenting, decision making and authority.

If we reframe the earlier question in terms of 'how do we learn about what parenting involves?' we can recognise that while our direct experience is a powerful influence, we also learn from the example and accounts of our friends, from the novels, short stories and magazines we read, and sometimes by reading text books or articles on family issues. Whilst few may actually read academic studies or accounts, summaries do wash back into the more accessible literature and there have been some successful examples of books reaching the general public as well as professional caseworkers. One excellent example is Robin Skynner and John Cleese's *Families and How to Survive Them.* Finally, there are a number of actual workshops on the theme of 'preparation for family life' run by health service staff, voluntary agencies and also by a number of enlightened schools. Without commenting further on any of these points — what preparation is available for the role of step-parent? What are the issues that confront step-parents? How do they deal with them? What do we know about the growth and development of the stepchildren themselves?

In view of what we know about the changing pattern of marriage, divorce and re-marriage, research studies are starting to emerge which point to some possible answers for some of these questions. However, it is a complex area fraught with difficulties for

the researcher and we must be cautious about interpreting findings. For instance, the 'category' step family could include natural mother plus stepfather, or natural father plus stepmother. Another variable that studies are not always clear in reporting is the child's age at the time of the break-up, and when the subsequent remarriage occurs. With the reconstituted family, the extent to which the step-children have access to both natural parents is also likely to influence any findings. Martin Richards in 'Post-divorce arrangements for children' reports that effects of parental divorce on children are worse if separation comes earlier, and that there is evidence that children do adjust better if they have at least 25% of the time with each of their 'natural' parents. Again, these factors are not always reported when studies are written up with the result that it may not be possible to make comparisons or draw conclusions.

Whilst neither parents nor step-parents can turn to a well articulated 'encyclopaedia of parenting' to resolve the difficulties they encounter, support and self help groups have provided help and personal validation for those who attend them, with the result that they are able to evolve more creative solutions to problems where they had previously felt disabled. Groupwork techniques have a considerable amount to offer in facilitating this process, and Rachel Gilliatt's paper describes a particular application of this approach with step-parents. Such support groups often free members from the previously isolating and incapacitating effects of their perceived problems, and enable them to be tackled more constructively. The issues raised in such meetings also highlight the emotional and interpersonal issues which suffuse the family agenda. Having shared with Rachel the experiences of leading a step-parent support group, as well as work with groups of parents faced with the prospect of a marital split, I was impressed by the courage of the parents in confronting the issues, of their undoubted concern for the needs of the children. However, many also felt isolated and unsupported, occasionally frightened by the strength of their own feelings and simply found great relief in sharing this with others in a non-judgemental, accepting setting.

As I outlined in the opening paragraph, my interest was in the development of the children, and in the remainder of this paper I will set that in the context of step-parent needs, as related in the key texts to which reference is being made, and in the support groups with which I have worked. One of the most thorough sets of findings emerges from the National Child Development Study of nearly 16,000 children followed up at the ages of seven, eleven, sixteen and twenty-three. A summary of the findings in respect of stepchildren was described by Elsa Ferri in *Step-children: A national study,* and some of the key points are listed below.

1. Economic circumstances

- stepfamilies were 'poorer' on most indices compared with unbroken families (eg on 'free' meals, bedroom sharing, financial hardship, household amenities);
- stepfather families were better off financially than single parent (mother) families — but tended to suffer more overcrowding;
- higher proportion of stepfathers among unemployed;
- stepfamilies were larger than unbroken families — probably because of merging;
- remarriage was the most effective way for divorced mothers to recover their economic position.

2. Family relationships

- children in stepfamilies were likely to get on less well with the father (ie stepfather) than children in unbroken families;
- children in stepmother families were far less likely to get on well with their mother (ie stepmother) than children in unbroken families;

- poor relationships were much more common when original family was broken by divorce rather than death;
- there was no general tendency for children in stepfamilies to have a negative view of their relationship with their remarried natural parent;
- parents and children rated 'choice of friends' and 'evening activities' as conflict sources;
- *paradox*: step-parents must be like a 'real' mother or father — but not supplant real one;
- higher incidence of divorce in second marriages.

3. Stepchildren's attitudes to marriage

- not really different from children in unbroken families but slight tendency for girls in stepfamilies to favour early marriage.

4. Parental interest and aspirations

- stepfathers were less likely to visit school in respect of their stepsons, had lower educational expectations for them and were also rated by teachers as being less interested in their school progress;
- 'in the case of boys the acquisition of a stepfather was associated with a lowering of parental aspirations in respect of school leaving age';
- there were fewer differences between stepmother families and unbroken families;
- children closely paralleled the parental expectations.

5. Children's personal growth and development

- parents in both types of stepfamily were more likely to see their children exhibiting problem behaviour;
- children in stepmother families were particularly likely to be seen by their parents as showing behaviour problems;
- teachers did not see any behavioural differences between children in stepfamilies or unbroken families (once social and economic factors were taken into account);
- however, children in stepfather families (as opposed to unbroken families) were more likely to be seen by a specialist (eg psychologist) for a behaviour problem, to be taken to court, to have contact with police probation, or to miss school (stepfamilies similar to single parent — mother — in this respect);
- children in stepmother families did not show such clear differences on the above indices.

6. Educational attainment

- there was no difference in teacher ratings between children in stepfamilies as opposed to unbroken families
- there was a slight tendency for children in stepfamilies have fewer exam passes

Conclusions

- 'it seems that the development of children with stepmothers did not differ very markedly from that of their peers in unbroken families . . . 'the results relating to children with stepfathers, however, were rather less reassuring. These children, and particularly the boys, frequently compared unfavourably with the unbroken families, and differed little from children living with lone mothers. This suggests that the arrival of a stepfather may not be a solution to all of the difficulties of fatherless families.'

However:

- 'differences . . . were rarely dramatic in magnitude and any indication of real developmental differences concerned only a small minority of children . . .'
  '. . . it remains true that the majority of children, even in stepfather families, seemed to enjoy satisfactory home relationships, to be making similar educational progress to children in other situations and to hold equally positive aspirations for their own future.'

Research studies such as this one give us valuable data on some aspects of family life, and help answer many of the questions a step-parent might raise about the likely implications of remarriage on a child's development. However, if this is augmented by the more subjective account of family life as shared in group work and some of the more open ended enquiries we can begin to see the issues in a more natural context. For instance whilst Elsa Ferri reported that 41 per cent of single parents might remarry to recover their economic position, Jacqueline Burgoyne in her Sheffield study (described in *Breaking Even: Divorce, your children and you*) also pointed out their desire to provide a more 'normal' home environment for the children. But even that intention has to take into account the language we use to describe remarriage, and the attitudes it conveys. It would be difficult enough to be typecast as 'wicked' in folk lore legend, without having to carry the other attributes attached to the title 'stepmother'. Step-parents commonly point out that the 'step' prefix has pejorative connotations. A number of proverbs support this stigmatising process:

> Take heed of the stepmother: the very name of her suffices.
> With the arrival of the stepmother, the father becomes a stepfather.

Brenda Maddox in her book *Step-parenting* traces the origins of the word from the Old English 'steop' linked with death and bereavement. A 'steopbairn' was an orphan. From the 13th century onwards 'step' was synonymous with 'in-law', and also signified the possibility of a new parent in the event of the death of a spouse. A 'stepmother' was literally a mother in law, and a 'stepson' was a 'son in law'. Curiously we have lost that sense of a father or mother in law, and perhaps that reflects our uncertainty about the 'job specification' for a step parent, in circumstances where both natural parents may be very much alive, although divorced. The role is less ambiguous where the remarriage follows bereavement and a situation exists closer to the original historical roots of the term. Not surprisingly, step-parents and children find this relationship easier to manage, and this is confirmed in Elsa Ferri's findings. Time and again children and parents protest at the way in which the vocabulary of remarriage focuses attention on, or may even create problems. Not all mothers relish another name change on remarriage, nor do the children generally wish to abandon their surname. As a result commonplace activities, such as school registration, pupil record cards and parent evenings may occasion confusion or embarrassment where these issues are still sensitive. (Incidentally the anxiety or embarrassment is sometimes on the part of the teachers and reflects their uncertainty in how to relate to the step-parent.)

Whether step-parents do support their children and carry out a full parenting role — whilst not attempting to replace or usurp the natural parent — hinges largely on the extent to which they themselves have come to terms with the relationships involved, and have 'negotiated' and defined their role with the family. The findings that stepfathers are less likely to visit school in respect of their stepsons indicates how difficult that may be to achieve.

The whole issue of names often symbolises parents' uncertainty over 'What do we tell the children?' in respect of the break-up of the old marriage and the development of the new relationship. The sometimes ephemeral course of adult sexual love may have

proven a tumultuous or distressing experience for the parents, and it may be difficult to conceptualise it as different from the enduring love between parents and their children. And this, in turn, may prove a forbidding issue for parents to talk through with their children. Just what does a six year old make of it when his or her parents say they are parting? The experiences of our support group were that it was vital for the child's peace of mind for him or her to be given explanations about the break-up of the parental marriage, and if sensitively handled it could strengthen the growth of trust and honesty within the relationship. Groups have also permitted exploration of the dangerous area of sexual feelings between stepfathers and stepdaughters which may allow the existence of such feelings to be recognised and placed within a context where the roles and responsibilities of the parents are reinforced.

Whilst Martin Richards described the importance for the stepchild of contact with both parents (and also the benefits for the parents themselves) access may provoke feelings that parents and children find difficult to handle. Where the parents have not come to terms with their feelings about the break-up of the marriage, the helpless child may be the vehicle by which they convey destructive messages to each other. Where the families have resolved such feelings and can negotiate openly, they often report bonuses for the child and also themselves — and access arrangements may provide an opportunity for step-parents to enjoy some time together as a couple. There is some support for this in research studies. Martin Richards also points out that there is no evidence that a continued relationship with both natural parents impairs the step-parent relationship. The key concept is the 'continued relationship' as opposed to what some of our parents described as the Father Christmas syndrome. Richards summarised it in this manner: 'Access visits must be long enough to remove the sense that they are a "special occasion". Excessive gifts and the provision of treats are a sure sign that an ordinary relationship has not been recreated.'

In summary, where does that leave us? It is as unhelpful to generalise about step-parents, as it is to generalise about parents as a whole. Stepfamilies may have a number of additional issues to take into consideration but the way in which any one family resolves the problems its members encounter in living their lives is a characteristic of that family. The negative connotation of the 'wicked stepmother' is not substantiated by research studies, nor by common observation. Jacqueline Burgoyne points out that at least seven per cent and probably ten per cent of children under 16 are 'currently living in a family that includes a step-parent, legal or otherwise'. In veiw of what we know of the trends in respect of divorce and remarriage, this minority is constantly growing.

In view of the connotation that still attaches to the title 'step-parent', it is not surprising that the media give particular attention to those cases that come to light where they are involved in child abuse or neglect. Logically the numbers should rise with more remarriage. But the higher incidence of remarriage may lead to greater public acceptance and paradoxically less media attention. For the future we do need further attention to the needs of step-parents, and especially of step-children. Some measures could be simply achieved. The reported non-involvement of stepfathers in the children's education is an issue that could be readily and sensitively addressed by schools. The support groups run in one large Midlands city by the Marriage Guidance Council for step-parents could be replicated in other parts of the country by other agencies. Developments such as the National Stepfamily Association signal that such changes are beginning and that step-parents are learning from and through each other. The aim must be for these and other developments to enable both sets of parents to perceive each other in a less threatening light, recognise that they need to form at least an adequate working relationship and negotiate openly with the children and each other to ensure

that the child's relationship with its parents is not distorted, but nourished and protected.

> The developmental needs of children do not change in accord with changes in the family structure.
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> Wallerstein & Kelly, *Surviving the Breakup*

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