



# Changing Times – Changing Families

## Workshop on parenting in Stepfamilies

Claire Salisbury

Increasingly in the Western world, families are formed where one or both partners have children from previous relationships. These stepfamily situations have specific challenges, different from those in families where all members are blood relations. My own experience as a parent and stepparent has inspired me to work therapeutically in this area, particularly as I have found the greatest support for my parenting to come from my own explorations in personal therapy. This is important work. The majority of families in the future are likely to be stepfamilies. These families usually need to put in a lot of work in order to become an integrated group. People often take on new families without much understanding of what is involved, when they find themselves struggling they are taken by surprise and find it hard to get support to help them through.

When AHPP invited members to offer workshops as part of the AHPP anniversary celebrations, I took the opportunity to present some of the issues faced by stepfamilies. I aimed to stress the importance and relevance of stepfamily issues in regard to future couple and family relationships and the implications for future generations.

I find that this subject never attracts a large number of people, however those who come, professional or otherwise tend to have a genuine interest and commitment to considering these issues, often because of personal experience. Three people came to the workshop. I was pleased that despite the small number of attendees, those

attending found the workshop inspiring and participated wholeheartedly. As always happens when I present this material, I found that I also came away with a new excitement, reaffirmed in my belief in the relevance and value of work in this area.

We discussed people's expectations of relationships and their families, the name and definition of the term 'stepfamily', what it means to people involved, the emotions that might be aroused and what it takes for a stepfamily to become cohesive. What are the benefits of such a family. We also role played a real stepfamily, (client of one of those attending), using chairs to represent family members,

when we ran out of people. This is always a powerful exercise. Once people are in the different family positions, emotions become very strong and clear, and hidden dynamics are revealed. Workshop participants were surprised and moved by the immediacy of their emotions, and found that they gained an experiential understanding they could not get through talk alone. The following is a synopsis of our discussion. I have not reported on the personal stories of those who attended

### **Family relationships**

The shapes of families and attitudes to relationships have changed drastically over the last thirty years. This is true in the UK and USA, not necessarily in third world countries, where traditional values are still prevalent and strongly upheld. Change is a matter of perspective and the increased divorce rate, single parenting etc. is seen as a sign of moral decline by many in India for example.

As a child, I remember conventional family values held strong; marriage was the desirable norm, a woman and man married, had children and stayed together without question. Divorce was rare and a divorced woman was something of a novelty, someone unconventional, and possibly loose, living with another person without marriage was shocking and practiced in the main by 'beatniks' and bohemians. This was true even among my parents' social group of 'thinking people'; doctors and liberal intellectuals. In this climate sex before marriage was practiced secretly and publicly disapproved of by the majority of people, single parents were practically unheard of, gay marriages unthinkable. Stepfamilies were unusual and something to be ashamed of, not as good as an ordinary family.

From the sixties onwards these established attitudes have increasingly held less sway and people have stopped adhering to them. Now, whether or not it is considered desirable, multiple different family configurations exist as commonplace. There are many second marriages and relationships where children from other relationships are involved, as well as single parents, gay couples etc. We have created freedom of choice for ourselves, have different expectations of our relationships and are less willing to tolerate what seems unsatisfactory. It seems that many people do not know what to expect of another person and give up at the first hurdle in their relationships. Often people seem not to understand the effort that is entailed in creating a stable relationship and are looking for 'the perfect person', the one who will understand them, tolerate them, be romantic, have the right sense of humour etc. All of the above means that many first relationships break up and second relationships struggle to survive - often also failing.

### **What's in a name?**

The term stepfamily is outdated, belonging to a time when stepfamilies were unusual. Many people whom I would categorise as being stepparents or part of a stepfamily do not recognise themselves as such. It is difficult to talk about families without using this word, however it is not one that people in the main like to apply to themselves and their families. There is some stigma attached to the name; stepmothers and fathers do not have a good press. Fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White present an archetypal cruel and envious stepmother; the abusive stepfather is a common present day figure, and these archetypes are based on emotions that may arise when people find themselves in these

situations. Research has shown that people used to consider themselves a stepfamily until they had fully accepted new members at which point they called themselves a family.

It is a term therefore that is useful for professionals and not necessarily helpful towards those whom it applies to. Stepfamily is simply a form of that complicated network of relationships we call family. I use this term for my own convenience, in order to be able to easily describe the particular situation of families where adults bring children from previous relationships. In doing so however, I realise that in some ways I am not reaching out and there is a real difficulty in attracting people who would benefit from support. Many people do not recognise their families as stepfamilies, they do however face particular and often unexpected difficulties in their family relationships.

### **Primitive Emotions**

Adults and children in stepfamilies frequently find themselves assailed by powerful emotions and complicated situations involving ex-partners, grandparents, other children etc. For example children in a stepfamily may have lost frequent contact with one of their parents (usually father), and are finding themselves living with and having to accept someone else that they did not chose and do not want. They may find themselves suddenly part of a larger family with stepbrothers or sisters, again whom they did not choose and may not like. They can become disturbed, competitive, demanding and acting out.

Family emotions are linked to a sense of blood relation. People feel strong links of loyalty and love to those with whom they are directly related even if

those people are abusive. This applies to both adults and children. There is a deep inclusiveness that biological relations usually have for each other, which step-relations don't have. (This is not always the case. Sometimes children who have been brought up by a stepparent since they were a baby see that person as mother/father and vice-versa). These feelings are strong,

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perhaps instinctual, and have the quality of territorial struggles and basic survival. It is for this reason that many people find it shocking to experience them.

Children may experience a step-parent as an intruder in the place of their real parent and their stepsiblings as competitors from outside. They may work hard to expel this intruder and become unlikeable because they are not liking or wanting to be liked. Moreover it is unlikely that their parent feels the same as the stepparent, so that tensions between stepparent and stepchild can become strains in the adult relationship. There is no guarantee that stepparents, stepchildren and stepsiblings will like each other. Of course this can be true

in any family, but where people are biologically related they tend to accept each other as being there, whereas in the stepfamily the fantasy is that it may be possible to push the outsiders away.

Because of the above, many stepparents find themselves in the position of an outsider from the biological family. Difficulties in the couple's relationship are often fought



over their differing positions with the children. A stepparent is in effect a stranger to the family and does not have a historical connection with their partners and their children in the same way as a parent who has been there from birth. One response to the outsider position is to the relationship they witness between their partner and child, the one in which they cannot take part. For example, a common situation is one where a stepfather feels that the mother is indulging a child. He will then try and remedy the situation, by disciplining the child and pointing out his/her faults to the mother. The mother then feels her relationship with her child is attacked and closes ranks, whereby the stepfather finds himself isolated and helpless. The adult

partners then find themselves in an extremely painful argument.

Adults may find themselves protecting their children from their partner who becomes perceived as an intruder. They may be competing with their partners' children for their partners love and attention, they find themselves having to parent children who do not want them around. Quite often adults who have considered themselves loving, reasonable, thoughtful and well balanced find themselves disliking their partners child and knocked by strong feelings of envy and competition towards children. The fear of being a bad parent or the archetypal wicked stepparent haunts these people, they may feel inadequate, unloved, bad and helpless. The emotions that they experience often relate to their own child feelings.

An additional strain on many new families is the existence of the previous partner. Most parents stay in contact with their children, whether or not they live with them. As I write I struggle to describe the emotions that parents, new partners, ex-partners go through in regard to their children, and the torment a child must go through when such situations are problematic. For example, a father not living with his child may be anxious for his/her welfare with a mother that he perceives as damaging. He most likely feels helpless and wants to be able to support that child. His new partner finds the child's mother impossible (she is jealous, makes arrangements difficult, does not want to talk, tells the child not to accept her) and yet finds herself having to have conversations and to allow her partner to have a lot of contact with the mother. It may be clear that the

mother is using the child in order to hold on to the father. It may be that the child is hostile to the stepmother. In such circumstances all members of the stepfamily and indeed the ex-partner are besieged by the most difficult and unreasonable of emotions; split loyalty, pain and loss, jealousy, envy, competitiveness, inadequacy, insecurity etc.

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In many cases, the passing of time does make a difference. Emotions become less raw, solutions are found, understanding, empathy and acceptance grows between family members, and loving relationships can be forged. However, along the way things can be incredibly tough. It is important for the family survival, that people understand that it is normal for stepfamilies to be difficult, perhaps seem impossible. That weathering the storms is essential for any stability to grow and difficulties do not mean failure. The stepfamily that survives has the potential of becoming a new extended family, with a large number of people networked through the joining together of two or more families.

## **Parenting**

Parenting is an incredibly challenging task and becoming increasingly so as we understand more about how we affect our children. Parents are often guilty and regretful of how they have been towards their children and it seems rare to find a compassionate attitude towards parents who in the main strive to be good enough while contending with their own tendencies. For many people emotional maturity comes with difficulty and often parents - from the course of their own lives - are undeveloped in some area that impacts their own and their partners' children.

While we are becoming concerned with the quality of our parenting, many older standards being seen as destructive ; with a relatively new emphasis, (less focus on obedience, education, future marriage). while we seek to understand more how to bring children up lovingly, with sensitivity and providing the appropriate foundation for them to flourish emotionally and physically.

It seems that support for parents often takes the form of 'how to do it' parenting techniques. While these are valuable, there is a strong case for backing these with therapeutic exploration. The real difficulties in families often stem from those areas where the parent has not themselves received adequate parenting. We learn how to be parents from our own parents. This is absorbed (introjected) and unwittingly we either find ourselves treating or perceiving our children as we have been treated and perceived or reacting - and doing the opposite. The process of projection seems to be particularly strong between stepparent and stepchild, where each may become 'bad' for each other. (bad child, bad stepparent).

It is also clear that where there is a strong relationship between the adults, difficulties with the children in the family can be more effectively

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managed. I find that a lot of the work that I do with parents and stepparents focuses on the couple relationship. With love, respect, support and the ability to listen existing in the adult relationship a solid foundation can be created. A 'good enough' relationship between the adults where both parties feel secure enough with each other to allow differing relationships with children (for example), is the best arena from which to parent in any family.

### **Families and the Law**

One of the participants at the workshop was a solicitor. He commented on the legal process; solicitors often seeing people who are divorcing. The law is not sensitive to the emotional pressures that people separating and tussling over property and children are going through. The result is that often situations are exacerbated. A couple who have separated because they are not getting on are usually angry and hurt with and by each other. They find

themselves in a situation where they are discussing issues of access and control of their children with a solicitor whose angle is legal, and who is looking to get the most for their client.

Often the fear of losing a child can mean that battles become very bitter and fought through the children, who become split. It is a realistic fear, as issues of access and custody often mean that fathers (usually but not always) lose some of their rights to partake in choices that affect their child and may have their contact restricted. In a hostile break up, such decisions may be fuelled by vindictive motives. Both parties may also have to accept that their child is going to be brought up, at least in part, by another woman or man. Clearly the legal process can do nothing to alleviate such concerns and a solicitor is not trained to help people reach constructive solutions when they are in conflict. While fairly recently the government was actively promoting mediation in divorce cases where children are involved, this is not being used to its full extent. This solicitor felt therapeutic work could usefully be an intrinsic part of the divorce process. He came to the workshop in order to understand more of what his clients were experiencing.

This workshop emphasised the difficulties faced by stepfamilies in order to highlight the challenges we face in changing our family structure. As more children grow up with adults who are not their parents and more adults take on other people's children, we need to understand what is happening to those children and adults. As parents, therapists, teachers and human beings with our urge for stable and loving relationships, we need to be as aware as possible of what ourselves and each other are

experiencing. Our children are our future and their family relationship experiences will influence their own families and abilities to relate.

In our Western culture we are undergoing an emotional revolution: we have overturned the pressures that tie us to prescribed relationships and social/religious order to freedom of choice. We are now challenged to find satisfying, creative and ethical ways of living and relating without a blueprint to go by. We want love, affection, inclusiveness, and stability, but we can no longer rely on it being provided by society's structure. As part of this revolution, we are living in new families that have a variety of formats. It seems to me that to be surviving through this changing time and in our changing families, we need to learn to respect and allow our own individuality as well as that of each other. In doing so we will be able to build and maintain families in these changing times and support our children to be able to have their own.

## Further Reading

Patricia L. Papernow, *Becoming a Stepfamily*, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland  
Barnes, Thompson, Daniel and Burchardt, *Growing up in Stepfamilies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Salisbury & Walters, *All Together Now*, Available from Parentline Plus

Trollope, Joanna, *Other People's Children*

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Claire has a practice in Highgate where she offers individual and couples therapy and supervision. She co-works with families, facilitates a weekly group for Men and Women and a monthly group 'Changing Times - Changing Families' for parents and stepparents.

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