

Changing Times - Changing Families

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With the increased breakdown of marriages and creation of single parent families, the number of stepfamilies is growing. When successful they provide a network of extended support for their members, with children sharing more than one set of parents, grandparents and siblings. Sadly the potential for this is often unrecognised and difficult to achieve. There is little support for the struggling stepfamily and not enough recognition of the problems faced by their members.

Stepfamilies are not helped by having a negative image reinforced by stereotypes such as the envious stepmother (Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty) and the abusive stepfather. These stereotypes have roots in real tensions that arise, however there is an imbalance. We often hear about the failing bad stepfamily and very little about those that work.

All families can be difficult; the pressures brewing in any family could split them apart, if it were not that parents and children usually have a sense of belonging to each other. Through this bond parents find the commitment and skills necessary to provide an environment in which children can develop and grow healthily. Children on their side tend to feel tremendous loyalty and love towards their birth parents. They are sensitive to family dynamics and when young adapt themselves in ways designed to keep the family together. These inbuilt tendencies help keep the family whole like an incubator within which children grow until they are ready to break into independence.

In a stepfamily, the original family has been split either through death, or more frequently through divorce or separation. This interrupts the family process, so that developing children have their safe world shattered to a greater or lesser extent. All stepfamilies are born of loss in some form and their members often have to deal with painful feelings such as grief and disappointment as well as coming to terms with many changes, some of which are unwelcome. Loss comes in many forms to adults and children in the stepfamily, although children are the ones who suffer most as they have the least choice and are dependent on their parents. It seems that most children naturally wish to have mother and father living together and getting on in what they perceive as 'a real family'. When the family breaks up, a terrible event that they have feared has come to pass. Often nobody has thought to, or known how to talk to them about this. Even if they have, children may not know how to express their own feelings and fears. Unless things have been managed very carefully they are likely to have lost ease of relationship with at least one parent.

Separations are rarely managed gracefully and relationships between separated parties are often strained or antagonistic. Children may have lost having mother or father to themselves, their home, familiarity and their position in the family if the stepparent has children of their own. Other pressures on children include the situation where they become go-betweens, split in their loyalty between warring parents or they may be used as weapons. Some parents feel jealous or threatened by their ex-partners new relationship and use their children to become informers. They may feel anxious that their children prefer their ex and new partner to themselves and this manifests in them attempting to turn their children against their ex and his or her new partner. Others make access arrangements very difficult or use the threat of limiting access rights if their ex-partner does not conform to their wishes. Clearly these situations put children in painful and difficult positions.

For these reasons, children experiencing the stresses of new family life can become behaviourally very difficult, making it hard for those looking after them. This can put considerable strain on new relationships. A stepparent coming in to a family may be rejected by children as they are seen as an intruding outsider, an unsatisfactory replacement of their real parent. The child may feel that the stepparent is the cause of their parents' separation and that if he and she were out of the way, then their family would get back together. This would cause them to treat the stepparent with hostility. They may be jealous of the time their parent is giving to the stepparent when previously the child had them to him/herself and they then become competitive with the stepparent. Having already experienced the breakup of one relationship they may feel at fault and test the new relationship for solidity and the ability to be held within it. To them the closer a new stepparent becomes, the more clear it is that their real father or mother will not be coming back. A new marriage can make this even more apparent.

For parents and stepparents the focus is different. Parents who have lost their original relationship may be disheartened and cautious, to them bringing in someone new could seem a hopeful step. They may feel responsible and (as do children) wish to have 'a real family'. If their child does not like their stepparent they may feel guilty and try to alleviate their guilt through needing the child to be happy. Stepparents may feel outside the parent child relationship. If they don't have children of their own they may find it hard to relate to a ready grown family. If the parent and stepparent decide to have a child between them this can throw up the different relationships with painful clarity.

Children in this situation can easily seem at fault and have a difficult time relating to their birth as well as their stepparent. The difficult feelings and situations that arise in these situations often take people by surprise. They do not expect to find themselves swamped with feelings which challenge their sense of being a reasonable person and parent. Such feelings can range from resentment or dislike of their partner's children to very strong rejecting feelings. Jealousy of the other person's child and protectiveness of their own are common.

A counsellor can help people to recognise that it is usual for strong and difficult feelings to arise within in a stepfamily and that it takes time for stepfamilies to become consolidated; two to ten years. Even when things do become more harmonious, different circumstances and situations can cause the conflicts to flare up again. People are often surprised by this, expecting themselves to be able to sort everything out quickly.

An example of a stepfamily:

Jo and Freda had two children Paul and Mary. Their relationship was difficult and Jo left, leaving Freda with the children. Freda found it hard to make arrangements with Jo so that while he kept in touch with his children he became more of a distant figure. They stayed with him occasionally over the holidays.

After a few years, Freda met Harry who had a child of his own Stuart, a year younger than Paul. Stuart lived with his mother and had three half-sisters. Harry and Freda started to live together and eventually got married. Stuart would come and stay over the holidays and Paul had to share his room with him. Eventually Stuart moved in with them. In the meantime, Jo met someone new who had two children of her own and they had a child Katie.

In the above situation Paul and Mary lost a close relationship with their father. They lost having Freda to themselves. Paul lost his position as being the only boy and found himself competing with someone close to his age. Mary and Paul felt resentful of Harry and Stuart who had come into the house they thought was theirs. They felt that they had to go along with things that they did not want. Furthermore the house that they thought belonged to Freda and themselves became Freda and Harry's

The children tried hard to tell Freda that they did not like Harry and were frustrated that Harry and Freda became closer. Eventually Harry and Freda married which meant that Harry was there to stay. The children then started to argue with Freda, seeing her as being taken over by Harry and refusing to do the things Harry asked for. As a family they spent periods of time when everyone was getting on quite well, however tensions that had not been resolved flared up at times of stress and living conditions became very difficult.

It is often when tensions have reached a crisis point that a family may turn to professionals for support. As shown in the example above, stepfamilies can be extremely complex. Paul and Mary for example found themselves part of a network of nine children and five adults (not counting grandparents). A counsellor needs to recognise that the complications within a stepfamily mean that its members are likely to experience a lot of difficulties and that family members probably need help to listen to and include each other. When working with stepfamily members it is important for counsellors to have some understanding of what it is like to be in one.

Although many of the issues that arise in a stepfamily are the same as in birth families, there are also elements that belong specifically to stepfamily situations. People living in stepfamilies are often shocked to find themselves struggling in ways that they never thought they would. At present there are few resources available for stepfamilies. Stepfamilies are growing in number and the children and adults within them need support and awareness of their issues from schools, counsellors and policy makers. Family structures are becoming more diverse and this has many advantages; however among the disadvantages are that parents are often unprepared in knowing what to expect and how to deal with it.

There is a blaming culture towards parents, who generally work as well as they are able and have limitations of their own. One way that parents can prepare themselves is by getting personal support perhaps from a counsellor/therapist as well as others in similar situations and developing a good understanding of their own histories and selves. This helps them to have the resources they need to take into their own families. We need to find ways of helping parents that are effective and that go beyond platitudes. Children after all are our future. They learn how to build satisfactory relationships and how to parent from their own parents. Stepfamilies at their best provide the opportunity for healing damage in this area if the original family has failed. As a parent, to take on a stepfamily and to form good relationships within it is challenging, takes time and the problems can seem insurmountable; however with perseverance and support it is possible for a stepfamily to be successful, and when it is there are many benefits for all concerned. The stepfamily with its multiple networks and potential for support may well be the extended family of the future.

Reference:

Papernow, Patricia L. *Becoming a Stepfamily Patterns of development in remarried families* Gestalt Institute of Cleveland.