STEPFAMILIES

New relationships, new challenges

A report by Parentline Plus

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Stepfamilies

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“My son has an unhappy relationship with his stepfather even though he has a very good relationship with his stepbrothers and sisters who are much younger than him. He enjoys looking after them and helping me. But he’s been in trouble with the school and I think he needs to talk to someone. He just won’t talk with us about what the problem is.”

Introduction

The emotional impact of separation, divorce or death has an effect on all members of a stepfamily and requires patience and understanding from adults, who may feel very differently from children about the changes which have occurred. Many children, their parents and family members are experiencing feelings of loss and bereavement as life changing events impact on their family. The introduction of a new adult, and perhaps of other children, whilst a child is going through this bereavement process can have long term consequences for their emotional and social development.

Stepparents can become the focus for their stepchildren’s anger, distress and uncertainty. In turn stepparents can find it difficult to break the barriers within the newly created family structure and build a positive and supportive relationship with their stepchildren. Given the challenges facing parents and children in a stepfamily, it is not surprising that this is a key issue many parents want to talk through when they contact Parentline Plus. One reason for parents contacting the charity about stepfamilies is because Parentline Plus was formed from the merger of three charities, one of which was the National Stepfamily Association. The organisation has retained a specialist expertise in supporting families going through change and giving guidance to professionals about working with stepfamilies.

Parentline Plus has looked in depth at over 14,500 calls from parents wanting to talk about stepfamily issues, particularly at what stepmothers and stepfathers are saying.

Key findings

- Conflict between a new partner or within a stepfamily is often the reason for a call to the helpline: 30% (4,400) of callers talked about conflict between children and stepparents.
- Stepmothers are worried about their stepchildren’s emotional state and the impact of divorce and separation on a child’s behaviour.
- Over 8,400 of the callers in the sample are worried about teenage children – stepfathers talk of high levels of anxiety about their teenage stepchildren; 14% of these are worried about their stepdaughter’s sexual activity.
- 20% of callers concerned about stepfamily issues are worried about school issues – particularly about truancy and bullying.
The facts about remarriage and stepfamilies

- It is predicted that by the year 2010 divorce, separation and repartnering will be the norm.
- Over half the divorced parents of children will re-partner forming a stepfamily.
- 4 in 10 marriages are a remarriage for at least one of the adults.
- The number of second or subsequent marriages has increased from 36,000 in 1971 to 116,694 in 1995.
- Estimates are that at least 50% of remarriages which form a stepfamily also end in divorce, and that 25% of stepfamilies breakdown in the first year.
- Rising divorce rates mean there are over half a million stepfamilies and over 2.5 million children are involved in stepfamily life.
- There are around one million dependent stepchildren under 16 years old.
- Many children live in more than one household, living with one parent, and around one million are having regular contact and visits with their other parent’s new family.
- Around 300,000 dependent children under 16 are born into a stepfamily.
- Official statistics do not count the thousands of young people aged 16 years and over who are involved in stepfamily life or the children or young people in stepfamilies where the ‘stepcouple’ are not married.

“I am finding my stepson’s relationship with his mother is paramount to his success and happiness in the future and think it is so vital that they repair their relationship. I know it seems silly, but I thought if we could just get some basic rules back it might allow them to at least be civil. But I have also talked to him about how does he think his friends see him (nice, funny, cool?) and tried to point out that his mum’s friends probably see her as being the same, nice, funny, cool. So they can’t both be wrong and that they must be able to meet in the middle.”

What research tells us about stepfamilies

Separation, divorce, loss and the stepfamily

Children and teenagers in stepfamilies may experience distress, anger, depression, anxiety and resentment. Although there is some evidence that divorce and separation can be associated with psychological difficulties for children (Amato and Keith, 1991; Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale et al, 1991), there is also a body of literature which suggests that conflict and marital stress before parental break-up may also be associated with poor outcomes for children. (Rodgers, 1994; Rodgers et al, 1997; Hope et al, 1998; Elliott and Richards, 1991)

Divorce or separation can often also lead to reduced financial circumstances, and the stresses associated with moving home, changing school and loss of social networks and social capital for both parent and child. Weiss (1984) found that, five years after divorce, families were on average living on half the level of income of the original family unit. Within Europe, an income of less than half average earnings is often seen as representative of the poverty line. Divorce and separation, then, can push many families into poverty, and at the
very least lead to reduced circumstances with all the disadvantages associated with that, such as poorer health, lower educational achievement, and reduced capacity for accessing services.

A new stepfamily is therefore formed as a result of loss, either from bereavement or following divorce or separation, and this may lead to increased conflict, parenting difficulties, reduced income (particularly for mothers) and higher levels of psychological disturbance amongst parents. (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001)

Parents’ separation and the formation of a stepfamily can impact on their children in a variety of ways resulting, for instance, in increased stress on sibling relationships (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Inevitably, the arrival of a new partner can put stresses and strains onto the family as it attempts to cope with the changes.

As children usually live with the biological mother following separation and divorce, the role of the stepfather may be complicated by the fact that his presence may be seen to disrupt formerly close ties and to alter them. For lone mothers, for example, the relationship between mother and daughter is often close - although that between mother and son may be more difficult (Hetherington and Jodl, 1994). Where children live with a mother who remarries or re-partners, the mother-child relationship can deteriorate, with mothers being more negative towards their children in the early stages (Bray and Berger 1993; Dunn et al., 1998); opposing their children more often than in families which have not split up and with children also displaying more negative behaviour towards their mothers. (Vuchinich et al, 1991)

Children who describe their stepparent as being involved in the household were significantly more likely to have a good relationship with them (Smith et al 2001). In particular, the interaction between child and stepfather has a strong influence on family stability and cohesion. How stepfathers cope with initial hostility, discomfort, and existing patterns of discipline and interaction may be key. For teenagers, difficulties may be made worse by male rivalry for dominance. By contrast, research suggests that teenage girls tend to display avoidance, resentment, withdrawal and hostility (Vuchinich et al, 1991). Stepfathers, perhaps not surprisingly, are seen by young children as offering less support than biological fathers in the original family unit. (Amato, 1987)

However, there is some evidence that after the early years the stepfather/child relationship tends to improve. This suggests that where families are considering re-forming as a stepfamily, it may help both biological and stepparents to know that initial difficulties are more likely to be overcome where parents and stepparents are aware of the likely tensions, can make allowance for them, and have agreed upon parenting/discipline practices.

Setting boundaries as a stepparent can be fraught with the likelihood of hostility towards discipline imposed by the new stepparent. It is easy to see how the early years of a stepfamily can provide scope for conflict, particularly where teenagers are involved. Research by Buchanan and Maccoby (1996), for example, found that half the young people surveyed did not think that the new partner had a right to set rules whilst other studies have found that child wellbeing was linked with high levels of closeness but low levels of involvement with stepfathers. (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001)

Such findings may be important in relation to young children, because these relationships tend to improve over time but deteriorate again in adolescence (Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage). Where children are aged over nine at the time of a remarriage, or repartnering, there is a sharp tendency for relationships to deteriorate in adolescence, with one third of boys and one quarter of girls disengaging from their families by the age of 15. (Hetherington 1993; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001)
There is some evidence, however, that where stepfamilies involve remarriage, teenagers respond more positively (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996), and where stepparents are aware of the need to support their teenagers’ move towards independence, the outcome is likely to be better.

Poor use of support services is seen within stepfamilies. Research indicates that there are significantly high levels of depression in mothers in stepfamilies. (Smith et al, 2001) Compounding the greater vulnerability of mothers in stepfamilies was the finding that they were less likely than other mothers to have contacted support services. Parents in the Smith study were found to be less likely to seek help from any source, despite half of them identifying needs or problems that they would have liked help with.

Parentline Plus – what parents tell us

The challenges for stepfamilies

“I am really worried about my 8 year old son. He has started having tantrums when he doesn't get his own way and it gets worse when my 12 year old stepson comes to visit. I have another stepson aged 13 and he is really well behaved – it is such a difference.”

All families face problems at some time, family life by its very nature is complicated. These complications are compounded in stepfamilies because of the variety and complexity of relationships and the different individual and family histories involved. Traditional pressure points of family life can be more stressful for stepfamilies because of this. Parentline Plus’ data demonstrates the reality of life within a stepfamily, with many and varied concerns and problems.

The data shows, for example, that parents are very aware of the correlation between a child’s behaviour and the formation of the stepfamily. There are indications too that it is stepfathers and stepmothers who register the most concern about conflict and challenging behaviour and its potentially negative impact on adult relationships. This may be because different attitudes towards childrearing and family life leads to disagreements in stepfamilies.

There are many reasons why our call data shows high levels of stress and worries about life in a stepfamily. Divided loyalties between adults and children, anxieties about favouritism, and feelings of rejection are common. Guilt is a feeling that can overwhelm adults and children.

Our work over the years with stepfamilies shows that time is often an issue. Time is needed for the couple to be alone to strengthen their relationship - the key to the stepfamily's success. Time is also needed for stepparents to develop a relationship with stepchildren and for parents to be alone with their children to reassure them that their love for them has not changed.

“*My stepdaughter wants to come back and live with us after university. I have no children and I find her really scary and manipulative and I know that me and her mum just won't see eye to eye if she lives with us. I feel completely powerless.*”

The issues

Setting boundaries

The data indicates that stepparents are frustrated by their inability to set boundaries for their stepchildren. Nearly 40% of these calls are about children aged 13-16, an age when most teenagers are testing their parents, seeing how far they can go, how fast they can break
away. Most of the calls are about the eldest child in the family. Female children are slightly in the majority – with stepfathers being most concerned about stepdaughters.

The findings also show how anxious stepparents are about the conflict they are experiencing in their relationship with their stepchildren – nearly 50% of calls from stepparents are about this. Such high levels of concern point to the fact that stepparents do want to make a difference and to build a constructive relationship with their stepchildren.
Risky behaviours

An interesting finding is the concern that stepparents feel about their stepchildren's sexual activity and other risky behaviours. This may indicate their difficulty in setting acceptable boundaries or ability to talk openly within the family about sex and relationships and the importance of safe sex. Stepfathers register particular concern about under age sex with regard to stepchildren (4%). Lying and stealing are also mentioned together with worries about children’s experimentation with alcohol and drugs.

“I don’t know what the problem is – is it my kids or is it him? I just can’t blame my kids because they don’t get on with their stepfather – why can’t they work it out together?”

Education and schools

Adults in stepfamilies, particularly if they are not the biological parent, register concern about the children's schooling. Once again it seems that stepparents are frustrated about the difficulty of asserting ground rules for their non biological children and so they are worried about not being able influence educational development, homework or even just attendance at school.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>category</th>
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<tr>
<td>a) Child not attending school with or without parental consent</td>
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<td>b) Child excluded from school</td>
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<td>c) Child not wanting to go to school</td>
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<td>d) School work</td>
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<td>e) Home work</td>
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<td>f) Special needs</td>
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<td>g) Learning difficulties</td>
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<td>h) OTHER</td>
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“I have a 13 year old stepdaughter who has been living with us since our marriage 3 years ago. Her mother cannot cope with her. She is violent and aggressive to her and her father and, at times, is completely out of control. Social Services have been contacted - they say contact the police. The police say contact Social Services. At school, her behaviour is fairly good - two or three incidents but mainly OK. She went to stay with her mother during the school holidays but the visit was not successful. It’s a mess and tearing us apart.”

Family relationships

"It was really hard for everyone to start with, but now we’ve got past that. There's a big sense of achievement. We're proud of the family we've made."

The level of psychological distress is higher amongst parents in stepfamilies than amongst those in an original relationship, and this is true for both mothers and fathers (Ferri and Smith, 1998).

The Parentline Plus call data demonstrates high levels of anxiety and stress amongst parents and stepparents. Nearly 3,000 parents talked about the tensions within their step family, whilst over 1,500 said they were depressed. 31% of calls mentioned feelings of anger.

Many parents and stepparents acknowledged the effect that divorce and separation was having on the children in the family. Stepmothers attributed levels of anxiety to the fact that there were problems over contact with a non resident parent. They also saw that the conflict generated between new partner and stepchild was a problem within the family. There were
worrying levels of concern about anger within the family 30% of stepfathers and 25% of stepmothers talked about children’s anger.

Tension between the repartnered couples and between ex-partners is also significant. Conflict between caller and partner was over twice as high as the average of all calls to the helpline on partner conflict. 14% of stepmothers and 13% of stepfathers talked about couple conflict.
The family dynamic is complex and extended. Grandparents can find themselves for instance in the middle of the family tensions – unhappy that they cannot see their grandchildren as regularly as before which can increases levels of anxiety across the family, and unable to offer the kind of traditional family support which leaves the new family more vulnerable and perhaps isolated. Nearly 500 callers in this sample talked about the tension between caller and their children’s grandparent.

Looking for help

Research shows that stepfamilies often do not make good use of services. One key reason is that parents in a stepfamily do perceive themselves as a special group, and do not define themselves as stepparents. (Smith et al 2001). As such it is not surprising that when asked about the services they use, many demonstrate lower than average engagement with formal support services.

It is important therefore that service providers and commissioners should not make assumptions about the way stepfamilies access and use services. Whilst recognising the complexity of this particular family dynamic, practitioners need to allow families to work from their own values and to respect the time it can take for a new family to take shape and to build mutually positive relationships between all those that are involved.

Conclusions and recommendations

“She told me that now she was pleased she had a stepmum. We talk about things she finds difficult to discuss with her mother – I’m not a substitute mum – it’s a different kind of love, more like friends really.”

Messages to professionals

It is essential that those working with families, including schools and health services, recognise that there is no ‘one size fits all’ family dynamic. Stepfamilies are just one form of family amongst many, and bring strengths as well as weaknesses. Professionals need to:

- Understand how repartnering can affect a child, both negatively and positively. Make sure you know and understand the implications of family change on any given family.

- Offer early and effective accessible advice and support on family change both for the child and for the parent or carer that is appropriate and that works, so helping to resolve problems before they lead to breakdown and acrimony. Always test the messages and the format with stepfamilies.

- Understand that stepparents may not feel they need specific support. Enable them to make decisions when they need to and how they need to, aided by accessible information and effective signposting.

- Ensure that when all families are going through key transitions, such as a child going from primary to secondary school, the roles and concerns of stepfamilies are addressed. Do not expect that generalist information and support will always be effective for stepfamilies.

- Offer support for the supporters. These can include grandparents, stepparents both residential and non residential, their children and aunts and uncles on all sides. All these family members can offer support at key transition times, but each has needs of
their own. Advice and support services targeted at this group may help to bolster children through difficult times and increase the effectiveness of a crucial resource.

**Tips and strategies for stepfamilies**

- It takes time to build a new family. Time is needed for stepparents to develop a relationship with stepchildren and for parents to be alone with their children to reassure them that their love for them has not changed.

- Adults have the opportunity to learn from past mistakes and all family members can benefit from other lessons learned: that relationships need to be worked at and the importance of valuing those around you.

- Coping with teenagers, and the challenges which they pose for parents, stepparents and others can lead to difficulties - especially over discipline.

- Family obligations in caring for elderly or frail relatives can be particularly complicated for stepfamilies. Once again, make time to plan what you have to do and what you can share out with others.

- If you are getting married, this can put things back as well. For the children it may finally confirm that their original family cannot be recreated. Stepfamily weddings also raise questions of who should be invited, what each person's role is.

- A death in a stepfamily can provoke different reactions, acting as a reminder of the different relationships in the extended family.

- Children gain a wider family. Stepparents, stepgrandparents and stepsiblings can all provide additional friendship and support.

- Children often come through into adult life with a greater capacity to adapt. They can learn to be more tolerant and to compromise and can be enriched by experiencing and learning about different life-styles first hand.

- Make time for yourself. Time is needed for you both to be alone to strengthen your relationship - the key to the stepfamily's success.

“*I think families divorcing helps children quite a lot to understand a bit more about how really important it is to value your family and everything.*”
References

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