

CHAPTER 1

Complex steps

Stepfamilies are many and varied. The common factor is that one or both of the couple has children from one or several previous relationship(s). These children may live with the couple all, part or none of the time. The partners' experiences may include no previous relationships, short-term relationships, cohabiting relationships, rape, marriage, widowhood, separation or divorce. There may be a mix of any of these.

Bonding – children and parents

What is common to stepfamilies is that the bonding order, the strength of relationship a member has with another, starts with the children.

In a nuclear family, boy meets girl, they fall in love, cohabit or marry, and then have a child. In this type of family structure, the couple have a history together, an emotional bond or tie, and possibly a legal bond too. When a child is born the parent has a blood bond with the child, a legal bond, and hopefully an emotional one of unconditional love. They begin to share and develop a relationship.

In a stepfamily, the first and strongest bond is between the biological parent and their child. It has history, and is a legal, blood and emotional bond. This parent then meets a new partner. This

chosen bond is emotional (passionate love), is growing and deepening, and may become legal too. The weakest bond in a stepfamily is between the step-parent and the stepchild. There is no legal bond, no blood bond and no shared history. The emotional bond will take time and effort from both the step-parent and the stepchild to develop.

'Just look at the children's bedrooms. They're such a mess, clothes on the floor, CDs lying around and empty glasses collecting mould. Why can't they hang their clothes in the wardrobe, or put them in the washing basket?'

Richard moans about his stepchildren again.

'Don't get on at them all the time. They'll do their rooms on Saturday. They don't have time during the week,' retorts their mum, Annette. This starts another argument about how Annette always puts the children first and Richard doesn't understand them.

Richard continues, 'Why do we have to fit our arrangements at the weekend round them? It's my weekend too. How about putting me first for a change?'

Annette bursts into tears. 'But I do love you.'

Both Richard and Annette are failing to recognize the different bonding orders in their new family. When a partner already has children, then that partner will tend to take their side in any disagreement. This is even more noticeable if the partner has been living with the children in a single-parent home. Richard has to accept that Annette has children and they are a priority in her life while they are young. This doesn't mean she loves him less, or that he doesn't matter a great deal, rather that in everyday living, the children's needs will often come first. She will tend to organize their activities, and fit her own round them. It will be important for

Annette to stand back and not to take sides with her children against Richard. It would be better for all of them if Richard and Annette discussed ways of parenting together.

Mary is stepmum to Paul's two daughters. The girls live with their mum, and stay with Paul and Mary alternate weekends. 'Every other weekend, Paul becomes the girls' dad. He drives over a hundred miles to collect them. Laura always needs something new, so they stop off at the 'factory outlet' and Paul spends a small fortune on them both. He says they have to be treated the same. Then they have to eat out. I'm left at home, with the beds to make, the shopping to get and a dinner to cook. Sunday morning they lounge around while I cook dinner again, and then Paul drives them back home. So much for a family weekend. I don't even feel I have a husband.'

Of course Paul wants to spend quality time with his daughters when they stay. He wants to be a good dad. When he was single he could devote all his weekend to his girls. Now he has a wife, but he doesn't want the girls to lose out because he has Mary. Paul's desire to be a good dad and to spend time with his children is great. His bonding with them is strong. But could he and Mary discuss these weekends so that some time is set aside for the girls to have their dad to themselves and some time built in for family fun time to include Mary? Perhaps Mary could sometimes go with Paul to collect the girls and join in the shopping trip, or perhaps they could all go to the cinema, or ten-pin bowling. This would enable the girls and Mary to get to know each other better, and for their bond to grow.

'Jack's a lovely boy. He's a charmer like his dad, and even when he's done something wrong it's hard to get cross with him. He's accepted me as part of the family, and confides in me. I was really worried for him last week

when he was rushed into A & E. Thank goodness he wasn't badly hurt in the accident. But I don't love him like I do my own child,' confessed Debbie. 'He's a good kid, and I care about him but it's not the same. Am I an awful stepmum?'

'... and the greatest of these is love'

Many step-parents echo Debbie's concerns. The English language is very poor when it comes to the word love. In Greek for example there are four words which convey different aspects of love – *philia*, *eros*, *storge* and *agape*.

Debbie has unconditional love for her children. She loved them from the moment they were born and would give her life for them. This is a very strong bond. Debbie loves her new partner too. That love includes friendship and is passionate, intimate and sexual. She hopes it will be lasting. Love for her stepchildren is more tentative. She has to get to know them, and that love will be more like that of love for a close friend – caring, giving and warm. It doesn't have to mean that love is less, but rather that it has different qualities.

Many relationships

One of the ways of describing family is that it involves relationships, many of which we did not choose! Even a simple family tree will reveal a variety of relatives. In a stepfamily, the number of relationships within the family increases dramatically. It isn't just the couple who relate, or even the step-parent and child, but stepsiblings, step-grandparents and so on.

To work this out mathematically, the number of members in the

stepfamily are counted. That number is multiplied by the same number minus one. The result is the number of relationships in the family.

So for a couple with six children between them:

$$8 \times (8 - 1) = 56 \text{ relationships}$$

If this couple each have two parents alive and one sibling, the new number of relationships is:

$$14 \times (14 - 1) = 182 \text{ relationships!}$$

Firm and fragile

The children in the stepfamily may also be relating to their other biological parent and their partner and children.

Sometimes Keith isn't sure how to relate. Who does he obey? Does he have to like all his siblings? Keith lives with his two sisters, his dad, his dad's partner and her child. He visits his mother most weeks. She too has a partner and they have a child. Keith is relating to four adults in parenting positions, two siblings, a stepsibling and a half-sibling.

When asked about his family, Terry doesn't know what to say. He's the eldest of three children. He lives with his mum and stepdad, and sees his dad during school holidays. His dad moved in with Margaret and her son when he left Terry and Terry's mum. Dad then left Margaret and her son and moved in with Jenny who has two daughters. Now Dad is living with Helen and her daughter. Terry's stepfamily relationships keep changing.

Some of these relationships will have been built since birth, but others are newer and more fragile. By considering the number of relationships in the stepfamily, and especially the number of steps, it is easier to appreciate why forming step-relationships takes time, care and compassion.

For any family to succeed, it needs stability and adaptability. Stability in a stepfamily will take time to achieve, especially given the experiences of at least some of its members that families don't always stay together. Adaptability is a key requisite for everyone in a stepfamily. This family is unique, and will have to adapt, and keep adapting to the changing needs of its members.

To Think About

- What are the strongest bonds in your stepfamily?
- How does this affect you and your partner?
- Do you need to accept, discuss or change anything?
- Count the number of members in your stepfamily:
Multiply that number by the same number, minus 1.
That number is the number of different relationships in your family.
How many of these are step-relationships?