

Insights into stepfamily life

A man meets a woman. They fall in love. They marry. It's a story as old as the hills. But when a man meets a woman, and the woman – or the man, or both of them – already have children, it's not the same story.

Care for the Family wants to equip people to support this ever-growing type of family unit. This information sheet gives an insight into some of the differences between stepfamilies and nuclear families, and offers practical ways to help.



Why are stepfamilies different?

Parenting

In a nuclear family, the couple become parents together. In a stepfamily, the natural parent and child relationship has already been formed, and will be stronger than the couple or step relationship. Parenting in a stepfamily isn't the same as birth parents parenting together. A step-parent and stepchild relationship takes time to build; there are no blood ties or shared history. The role of a step-parent is not defined; the step-parent has many responsibilities, but no 'rights'.

Couple relationship

In a nuclear family, there is space to be 'just the two of you' before the children come along. In a stepfamily, the newly-formed couple relationship has to develop in front of the children.

Past experiences

Each member of the stepfamily will have previous experiences of 'family', which may include hurt, violence, death, rejection or betrayal. A child may have been rejected by a father; a wife may have been abused by a husband; a man may be unable to let go of the memory of his first wife who died.

Complex relationships

The wife relates separately to her husband, her own children, and her stepchildren. Each one of them relates separately to her, to her husband and to each other. Then add the large

number of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins ... this is not a nuclear family!

The 'other' parent

By definition, there will be a previous partner for one or both adults in the stepfamily. Whether the previous partner is living elsewhere or has died, she or he will be 'present' in various ways and this can be unsettling for the stepfamily. They may be present in an emotional way, or via grandparents and other extended family members. There may be money issues involved, with maintenance for the children; or difficulties over contact arrangements.

Facing the facts

- Four in ten marriages is a re-marriage for at least one of the adults.¹
- The number of second or subsequent marriages has increased from 36,000 in 1971 to 116,694 in 1995.¹
- Rising divorce rates mean there are over half a million stepfamilies and over 2.5 million children involved in a stepfamily.¹
- There are around one million dependent stepchildren under 16 years old.¹

Source: ¹Parentline Plus www.parentlineplus.org.uk

It takes time to build a stepfamily

Even when the children think their parent's remarriage is a good idea, it's not the same as the experience of living together as a family – especially when they have ready-made new siblings vying with them for their parent's attention. Two households coming together, with their own set of traditions, and their own rules and boundaries, mean conflicts can soon arise.

With hard work and patience, these conflicts can, in time, be ironed out.

Different families have different needs

So these families do not need the same sort of advice and counsel that a nuclear family might need. Some step-parents told Care for the Family that their greatest need was for their 'difference' to be recognised, for understanding of their family structure, and to be accepted and not judged.

"Remarriage is not the 'happy ending'; it is a new challenge!" we were told. "Stepfamilies are more complicated than people think. Step-parenting involves sacrifice, and investment in partner and children."

But, at the same time, they wanted to say: "There is good life in a stepfamily. Second time isn't second best. Our stepfamily is great – it took time but it's worth all the effort."

What sort of pastoral care can be offered to these families?

- Support the couple in their marriage. A strong relationship between the couple is the backbone to the stepfamily. Offer marriage preparation that is specific to them, before they marry, and support their marriage after the wedding. You might find it useful to use *From this Step Forward*, a course produced by Care for the Family. It's especially for church leaders who wish to provide marriage preparation for new stepfamilies (see Bookshelf section below).
- If you are in any way involved in helping to plan the wedding of a new stepfamily couple, help them to work out the priorities for the day – how to include the children in the occasion; whether or not they should have a honeymoon, etc.

As time goes on, and if everyone is working together, the family can establish its new identity, forming its own rules and traditions. It can become a whole, instead of two halves pulling in different directions. A successful stepfamily is one that is a cohesive unit, where all members have loyalty to one another. Unfortunately, this does not always happen.

Estimates are that at least 50% of remarriages which form a stepfamily also end in divorce, and that 25% of stepfamilies break down in the first year.¹

Source: ¹Parentline Plus www.parentlineplus.org.uk

- Offer guidance on forming, and living in, a stepfamily. The couple will need support, not only in their own relationship, but also in their role as parent and step-parent. Again, *From this Step Forward* can help you achieve this aim.
- Listen to them – even if you have not walked that way yourself, become acquainted with the issues so that you can listen constructively.
- Counselling should only be offered by those who have an appreciation of stepfamily issues. In some cases, bereavement counselling will be necessary.
- Look at the parenting resources and courses you offer. Make sure they include step-parents. Consider adding new items specific to stepfamilies to your supply of resources.
- Try to find opportunities for parents in a stepfamily to meet others in a similar situation.

There is every chance for stepfamilies to become happy families, given time, commitment, and outside support where necessary. One man who has been married for five years and has two stepchildren told us: "I have found that as a step-parent one has the opportunity to have all the challenging things of parenthood and all the good. I am both a stepson and a stepfather. I can only be the stepfather that I am because of the example of my stepfather. I can only be a father because someone chose to be a father to me."

Extra help

Support groups

Parentline Plus

520 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road,
London NW5 1TL Helpline: 0808 800 2222
Website: www.parentlineplus.org.uk
Produces booklets for stepfamilies.

Bookshelf

From this Step Forward

Care for the Family, £19.99 (S699)
A CD-ROM based course that enables church leaders and other facilitators to provide marriage preparation for couples forming a stepfamily.

Every Step Counts

Available from Care for the Family, £6.99.
An easy-to-read book packed with real-life stories and practical suggestions for building a healthy stepfamily.

The Relate Guide to Second Families

Suzie Hayman, Vermillion, £9.99

The Smart StepFamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family

Ron L.Deal. ISBN 9764226576.