

STEPFAMILIES

an extract from

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too*, (4th ed.) Adelaide, East Street.



Love does not conquer all. It especially does not conquer fantasies that, if we just pretend hard enough, our repartnered family will be just like a first-time (or nuclear) family. Instead, the route to a healthy stepfamily is through recognising the different history, emotions, values and expectations that each family member brings.

Stepfamilies are as common today as in the 16th and 17th centuries (Whelan & Kelly 1986), although today they typically succeed parental divorce rather than the death of a parent, making the children's adjustment somewhat different. In her helpful book, Rodwell (2002) uses the analogy of putting petrol in a diesel car. The car runs well when given the fuel it requires, but does not function adequately when the driver pretends that it needs only ordinary fuel.

So it is in repartnered families. Stepfamilies need different operating principles than nuclear families, because they are performing many roles at once, with responsibilities spread across their present and former families, and are negotiating complex relationships among all family members. They *are* different from – although this does not mean less than – nuclear families. Therefore, in order to thrive, they need different operating principles. One of the key ingredients will be giving yourselves *time* first to adjust to the dissolution of your former families and then to fashion new ways of behaving as a repartnered family.

It will help when you give yourselves permission to retain your differences and to see the two families that come together as being two families who live in one home, not one new 'blended' family. Conflict will only escalate if you avoid talking about your differences: you will need to negotiate expectations for each family member. This will be an ongoing, rather than a one-off process, with no set agenda about the type of family you have to become, but rather allowing its shape to unfold over time.

STEP-PARENTS

Both halves of the labels 'stepmother' and 'stepfather' are problematic: the 'step' part is associated with the fairy tale forebodings of the wicked step-parent; while, more importantly, the 'parent' half of the word is misleading, as partners of a birth parent are not parents of their partner's children and cannot act as if they were. The children already have two parents, regardless of whether one is deceased or merely elsewhere.

Given that your position will not be as a parent, the role you eventually occupy in your partner's children's lives will depend on many factors, including

their age when you entered their lives and whether they live with you virtually full-time or visit only occasionally. Either way you will need, first, to negotiate your role with your new partner and, second, allow relationships with the children to unfold at the children's natural pace, not your own. They did not choose to have you in their family; their parent did.

Ultimately, your role might be like a teacher (who has varying degrees of affinity for the children in his or her care but who nevertheless can pass on some wisdom), a guide, or perhaps an extended family member (such as an aunt, uncle or grandparent) – but you cannot displace and will not replace the children's birth parents. Neither can you be the children's friend because friendship is reciprocal, equal, voluntary and has no agenda, all of which are violated by your status in the family.

You might never achieve emotional closeness with your partner's children, but this degree of distance can be appropriate, while still being a significant and beneficial influence in the young people's lives. Regardless of how close you ultimately become to your partner's children, what you do and say to them will matter to them: it will make a difference.

Female partners of a birth father

If you are the female partner of a birth father, you need to be aware that you cannot please all the people all the time. You cannot be such a good 'mother' that you will make up to your partner's children for any sadness they feel about their birth parents' separation. If you also have your own children, it will be easy to slip into parenting all of them. But your partner's children can experience this as a loss of the care previously provided by their birth parent, while you could easily become overwhelmed, resentful and unappreciated. On the other hand, you cannot ask children to be grateful for everyday care – such as a cooked meal – as they have a right to eat; appreciation of the caretaking that you do for your partner's children needs to come from your partner, not them.

All this tells us that if you are a birth father, you need to know that, given that your new partner is not the mother of your children, she cannot act as one. She cannot take more care of your children than you do yourself. If you relegate the care of your own children to your new partner, you will be heading for another divorce. So, to protect your relationship with your new partner and her relationship with your children, you will need to maintain your front-line fathering: you cannot be dominant and yet dormant (Rodwell 2002).

Male partners of a birth mother

The challenges for a male partner of a birth mother (the 'stepfather') can be a little more manageable than for the female partner. Some issues that men in repartnered families commonly mention is that they feel compelled to protect their partner from her children's emotional outbursts. If you find this happening for you, do keep in mind that she has history with these children and has her own ways of responding to their discourtesy, so let her use them. To have a place in the new family, you do not have to be the disciplinarian or the powerful one. And, before you can have any influence, you need to have built up a relationship with the children first. So, Newman (2004) offers a useful suggestion of saying how the behaviour causes you to feel, as in 'I feel sad for

your sister to hear you talking to her that way' or 'I feel disturbed and upset when I hear your mother and you arguing with each other like that'.

You might feel resentful if you have to provide financially for another man's children. Therefore, it can be important for the family to organise ways for the children's mother to earn some income, while also respecting the value of her unpaid work within the home.

YOUR NEW COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

Even when couples have stepped outside of traditional gendered roles (as may be the case with 'sensitive new-age guys' or homosexual couples), your expectations for each other will need ongoing negotiation. To minimise the disruption in routine for your new family, you will need to negotiate with your new partner the timing of your children's access visits and be sure not to transfer all your attention to them during access visits, as this would starve your couple relationship of the closeness that it needs to survive.

Be careful that your fears of another relationship break-up do not make you too intense about the challenges in your new family. Some hassles that you might think are due to your being a repartnered family could just be the usual challenges of adolescence, or children trying out their emotional muscle on hapless parents. For example, parents sometimes (inappropriately) ask if the children would mind if they (the parents) have a night out alone together. Children of both first-time and repartnered families will object and it has nothing to do with the children's jealousy of your relationship. They just don't like being left out.

When your relationship is strong, a shared child can be a joy, but if the relationship is strained, do not delude yourselves that a shared child will help. Sometimes the desire to have a child together is to replicate a nuclear family, to be 'normal' again. But a shared baby cannot achieve this.

THE CHILDREN

At the separation of their first-time family, the adults might have been so absorbed with their own pain or anger that they were not able to help their children resolve theirs. For this reason, and the fact that it is the adults' decision to live together, not the children's, the children might need extra time and support to adjust to new stepfamily arrangements. If you push them to accept your new partner too quickly, they will resist; this, in turn, might cause your partner to withdraw from having a relationship with them.

The age of the children will make a difference to their adjustment to the new family. Whereas young children may adapt reasonably easily to new routines and systems, adolescents and those living with you part-time will take longer to adjust.

The children's grief at their parents' original separation can be renewed at the time that a new family is formed. This comes about not only because the repartnering signals the finality of their parents' separation, but because it can result in fewer contacts with their non-residential biological parent.

The basic strategy for establishing a repartnered family is to use everyday communication skills (– see Porter 2006) to listen to the children's feelings and reactions, as these might not be so much about their parents'

separation or the repartnered family, but simply about not having permission to feel as they do.

In recognition that everyone will need his or her own space, give the children their own dedicated area in your home. If that cannot be their own separate bedroom, allocate a locked cupboard or storage area where they can stow their possessions during and between visits.

Do not require the children to change their surname in a quest for your family to appear nuclear once again. Children have a right to their own names and to recognition of where they have come from. (Given that surnames will be different within the family, females might question changing their surnames to their new partner's, as that can then give the appearance that they are the mother of their partner's children, but not of their own.)

Encourage the children to maintain their separate interests, and do not oblige all family members to participate in 'family' outings such as attending one child's school play or football practice. Forcing the children to eat or play together on the grounds that 'We're all a family now' signals that the nuclear dream is still alive in your heart, whereas the children are likely to be more realistic than this and to realise that these outer displays of unity do not turn the new family into a nuclear one.

The most important thing is to continue to spend some time alone with your own children so they do not experience your new partner as taking you away from them. This has an added benefit that, while you are spending time with your children, your new partner can have personal time; this in turn, ensures that he or she does not feel invaded by your children. As children's scripts as the youngest, only girl, only child, or eldest can be disrupted when stepsiblings move into the home, time with the original family members also gives them some time when they can occupy their former roles.

As well as continuing your close ties with your own children, you need to ensure that they maintain their relationship with their other parent. Sometimes he or she might withdraw to avoid getting in the way of your new family, or some might believe that your former spouse is 'spoiling' it for your new spouse and try to exclude him or her. But, except when their other parent abused them or you, a cessation of contact will be detrimental.

Sibling relationships

Biological siblings whose original family was stressed might have united together to cope, making it difficult for step-relatives to penetrate this barrier. On the other hand, without the restrictions of an incest taboo, step-siblings may begin to feel sexually attracted to each other, particularly with their interest in sexuality heightened by observing their parents' romantic relationship. Consensual relationships might be a reaction to feeling deprived of their parents' love; therefore, the other measures mentioned here can prevent inappropriate intimacy arising from this source, while the seduction or exploitation of a child by someone older will need to be treated as abuse.

Do not get in the middle of disputes between siblings. The same techniques used for any sibling disputes (see Porter 2006, or the paper on this topic on this website) will be useful whether the children are blood relatives or not.

Behavioural difficulties in the children

Although the children do not have to feel any close bond with their parent's new partner, they do have to show him or her some basic courtesy. Considerate behaviour is mandatory.

Problems over the children's behaviour are actually reminders for the two partners to work as a team. When the behaviour of your partner's child is creating conflict, you will need to negotiate with your partner that he or she intervenes, rather than dealing with the children yourself.

Aside from everyday hassles, ongoing behavioural problems can occur when the children interpret their parent's closeness with a new adult as a rejection of themselves. Some will also act out in an attempt to reunite their birth parents. One child in particular can be the scapegoat, taking on the role of troublemaker. Often, if that child goes to live with his or her other parent, this job simply falls on someone else. It is important, then, to realise that it is not the new partner nor any particular child who is the problem, but the fact that the fantasy of reuniting their former family is still alive for the children.

If the children live only part-time in your family, you might be reluctant to upset them by disciplining them. But other children living in the home permanently will resent the unequal expectations, while the visiting children will feel that their membership of your family is tenuous. They will also pick up the negative vibes from their stepsiblings. It can help, therefore, to discuss the household expectations, and to clarify that visiting children are a part of the family too and therefore incur all the rights and responsibilities of being a family member.

Do not let the children manipulate your guilt. Although children might feel powerless to influence your decision to remarry, they have great power to make you feel guilty and to convince you that you have made them miserable. If your children try this, listen to their concerns – but if these are unfair or unreasonable, remember that the children are free to feel happy or miserable: it's up to them. You cannot force them to be happy, and if you have taken all necessary steps to assist them, their unhappiness is not your fault.

EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS

There is no reason for you or your children to lose your relationships with your former spouse's extended family. Despite some potential initial discomfort, extended family can build relationships with your new partner while remaining loyal to their own son or daughter (your former partner): after all, this is what the children are being asked to do (Rodwell 2002). Members of your former spouse's family do not have to pretend to feel equally close to your new partner's children as they do your own, but they can express an interest in them as people. The children themselves recognise the difference in their relationship and do not expect equal treatment.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Boyd, H. (1998). *The step-parent's survival guide*. London: Ward Lock.

Hart-Byers, S. (1998). *Secrets of successful step-families*. Port Melbourne, VIC: Lothian.

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.

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