[11]

Step-parenting

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MANY AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN SPEND part of their childhood living in a step-family and many will grow up to be the step-parents of tomorrow. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (2007), approximately one in ten couple families contain resident step-children. In Wave 3 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, 13% of households had either residential or non-residential step-children, or both (Qu & Weston, 2005). Early research, both in Australia and overseas, has found that children often experience difficulty adjusting to the changes associated with their parents' repartnering, especially in regard to developing a relationship with a parent's new partner, the step-parent. This chapter focuses on the role of the step-parent and presents an overview of research and clinical literature that informs our understanding of the role and experiences of being or having a step-parent.

Step-family terminology

A number of different terms have been used to describe step-families, including repartnered families, remarried families, and blended families. A number of terms are also used to describe different step-family types. "Simple step-families" refers to families in which only one of the adults has children from a previous partnership. "Complex step-families" refers to families in which both adults have children from previous partnerships. "Step-father families" are simple step-families with a mother, her children, and her partner. Similarly, "step-mother families" are simple step-families with a father, his children, and his partner.

Step-families can be cohabiting or remarried. Children of either parent may be living in the household, all or part of the time. In complex step-families, children have step-siblings. Some repartnered couples, also referred to as step-couples, go on to have a "mutual" child of their own (referred to in the Australian Census as "blended" families; ABS, 2003). The children in these families then gain a half-brother or half-sister. Hence, while there is evidence that the "step-" terms have some negative connotations, they

allow us to talk about step-family relationships and provide step-family members with names for their step-relationships.

Structural differences of step-families

While established step-families can look very much like non-divorced families from an external perspective, step-families are different in essential ways and these differences underlie many of the challenges that step-families face. Papernow (2006), an American step-family therapist, talks about "step-family architecture" and argues that it is this "architecture" or structure of the step-family system that creates challenges for adults and children.

Unlike non-divorced families, in which babies are born into an established couple's relationship, the majority of step-families are formed after parental divorce, the death of a parent, or the marriage of a single parent who has raised a child alone (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Hence, prior to step-family formation, children have already gone through one major family transition and the stresses associated with that. The transition from a sole-parent family to a step-family then involves a re-organisation of family roles and rules, and the development of new step-relationships (Hetherington, 1999; Papernow, 2006).

Step-family therapists observe that step-parents enter the family as an outsider. The bond between children and parents is well developed, but step-parents and children are relatively unfamiliar with each other. While the couple's relationship is freely chosen, the relationship between the step-parent and step-children is not. It is a by-product of the couple's repartnering. Children's readiness to accept the step-parent is also influenced by their age and gender, and their level of functioning prior to repartnering. Girls appear to experience greater difficulties than boys with gaining a step-father, and adolescents can be more challenging for step-parents (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Children who have behavioural or emotional problems during the sole-parent period also experience more adjustment difficulties (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Another important structural difference relates to the couple or marital dyad. In non-divorced families, this dyad is also the parental dyad. However, this is not the case in step-families, where at least one of the adults (or both, in complex families) is not a parent to some of the children in the household. Research suggests that step-couples often find it easier to relate to each other as partners, but struggle in relation to the care and management of the children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). A number of studies have found that most conflict between couples in step-families is over issues to do with the children (Hobart, 1990). To add to the complexity, there may also be step-siblings present in the household, some couples may have a "mutual" child, and some children may spend all or some of their time in their other parent's home.

Step-parents: Stereotypes and ambiguity

The step-parent role, particularly that of the step-mother, has been subjected to negative stereotypes for centuries. This is clearly illustrated in the children's stories of Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella and Snow White. In all of these stories, wicked step-mothers mistreat their step-children out of jealousy or competition over resources. Stereotypes of the wicked step-mother and abusive step-father can affect children's perceptions of step-parents and step-parents' perceptions of themselves in negative ways (Claxton-Oldfield, 2008). As a result, some parents and step-parents reject the use of the term "step-" to describe themselves and their step-family relationships.

As well as these negative stereotypes, the step-parent role and other step-family roles are "non-institutionalised" and therefore lack established societal norms and expectations that could guide step-parents and children in how best to relate to each other (Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1994). This lack of institutionalisation may underlie some of the ambiguity that is associated with the step-parent role. Studies have found that there is a lack of clarity or agreement between step-family members in regard to the step-father role, and adults and children tend to view the role differently, with parents and step-parents believing that a more active parenting role is appropriate, but children seeing the role as being less active and more like a friend (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1999). There is also evidence that step-fathers themselves are not in agreement about what it means to be a step-father (Marsiglio, 1992).

The step-parent role and child wellbeing

Early step-family studies, both in Australia and overseas, found that children in step-families had an increased risk of adjustment difficulties compared to their peers in non-divorced families and also, for some indicators, in sole-parent families (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). In an early Australian study, Ochiltree (1990) compared the competence of children and adolescents in intact two-parent families, step-families, and one-parent families randomly selected through the Australian school system. Controlling for socio-economic status, children and adolescents in one-parent families were similar to those in two-parent families. Children in step-families, on the other hand, had lower reading ability, impulse control and self-esteem. Rodgers and Pryor (1998), reviewing British research on the outcomes for families of divorce, also concluded that children in step-families had an increased risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems compared to children in non-divorced families, and increased risks of having poor educational outcomes, leaving home early, and beginning sexual activity early compared to those in sole-parent and non-divorced families. Ganong and Coleman (2004), in their review of the step-family literature, concluded that the risk of adjustment problems for children in step-families is now well established.

In 1984, Crosbie-Burnett conducted a seminal study in the United States in which she investigated the relative importance of the marital relationship versus the step-father–child relationship in predicting family happiness in step-father families. She found that satisfactory relationships between step-fathers and children were more highly associated with step-family happiness than was the marital relationship. Bray and Kelly (1998) and Hetherington & Kelly (2002) came to similar conclusions based on their longitudinal studies of step-families. These studies drew attention to the "centrality" of the step-father–child relationship within the step-family system and the importance of the step-parent–child relationship to child and step-family wellbeing.

Pryor (2005) in her New Zealand study of step-family resilience found that children's feelings of closeness to their step-parents correlated with children's perceptions of their own strengths. Ochiltree (1990), in her Australian study, also found that the children in step-families with high self-esteem had a good relationship with their step-parents, while those with low self-esteem did not get on with their step-parents.

Further, results from a large study in the United States found that close relationships with both non-resident fathers and resident step-fathers were associated with better adolescent outcomes; however, relationships with step-fathers affected outcomes more than relationships with non-resident fathers (King, 2006), perhaps as a result of the greater level of day-to-day contact with step-fathers. Hence, there is a growing consensus

among family researchers that the step-parent–child relationship affects child wellbeing, and many of the challenges step-families face revolve around the role of the step-parent (Schrodt, 2006).

The roles adopted by step-parents

There is variability in the roles that step-parents adopt. As mentioned previously, it is common for step-parents (both step-mothers and step-fathers) to take on a parenting role and attempt to build a "normal" family in which the step-parent engages in the care and discipline activities of parenting (e.g., Coleman, Ganong, & Weaver, 2002; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004). Other step-parents try to become friends with their step-children and do not take on a disciplinary role, but rather maintain a supportive role (e.g., Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Some step-parents focus primarily on the relationship with their partner and have less involvement with the children (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Still others disengage from the children, which can occur after initial attempts to relate to the children are rejected (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Adaptive roles for step-parents

Researchers and step-family therapists have concluded that an adaptive step-parent role is different from a parenting role. In non-divorced families, authoritative parenting—characterised by strong warmth and support, and moderately strong but responsive discipline—is associated with positive child adjustment (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). However, a number of studies have found that step-parent discipline and control appear to be particularly problematic in step-families, especially in the first two years (Bray & Kelly, 1998). Many step-parents take on a disciplinary role with their step-children early on. For example, Funder (1996) found that 88% of Australian step-parents in her study began to set standards for children early in step-family life. In a more recent New Zealand study, Mobley (2012) found that two-thirds of the adults she interviewed believed that step-mothers and step-fathers ought ideally to be able to take up a disciplinary role with children and to share this role with parents. In fact, children and adolescents tend to rebel against step-parent discipline (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and believe that it is "not the job" of the step-parent (Mobley, 2012). This is particularly so in the first two to three years of step-family life.

Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992), in one of the first longitudinal studies on step-families in the United States, found that those formed prior to children's adolescence were most successful when the step-father supported the mother's efforts to discipline the children, attempted to build a close relationship with children, and only gradually attempted to exert authority. Similarly, it has been found that "laid-back" step-parents appear to be more successful in building relationships with children than "take-charge" step-parents, who are concerned with exerting control (Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). More recent research, however, has shown that some children, including adolescents, will grant some authority to step-parents whom they trust. Schrodt (2006), in a study of 522 young adult step-children, found that some young adult step-children who had close relationships with their step-fathers, and were confident in their positive concern, had granted the step-father authority in their lives.

Step-family therapists (e.g., Browning & Artlett, 2012; Papernow, 2006) have also emphasised that step-parents need to take time to get to know their step-children before attempting a parenting role, especially in regard to discipline. They believe it works best if step-parents support the parent's discipline, and act as back up when parents

are not present. Papernow discussed the need to develop a "middle ground" between step-parents and children, which is characterised by sharing interests or activities, and having a sense of knowing and trusting each other. This then allows for the step-parent to eventually have greater influence in the child's life.

Step-mothers

Finally, it is important to comment on the special difficulties that step-mothers face. While the research discussed above is relevant to step-mothers, it is important to note that women in this role experience greater levels of stress than step-fathers (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), and children living mainly in step-mother families tend to have more adjustment difficulties than those living in step-father families (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Step-mothers also report experiencing less satisfaction in their relationships with step-children and see their relationships as being more conflicted (Hart, 2009; Pruett, Calsyn, & Jensen, 1993).

There may be a number of reasons for these increased difficulties. Perhaps the most important is that many step-mothers find themselves taking on the primary care of their step-children and doing the majority of household tasks for the family (Cartwright & Gibson, 2012; Church, 1999). This is likely influenced by the couple's gendered expectations that, as the woman in the household, the step-mother will take over the responsibilities for looking after the household and the children (Cartwright & Gibson, 2012). When step-mothers take on this parenting role, they experience a backlash from the step-children, who resent their control or influence (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Step-mothers are also burdened by negative stereotypes that have persisted for centuries, and may find themselves competing with the idealised image of the biological mother. Step-mothers sometimes find themselves in competition with the biological mother (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013), some mothers report feeling threatened by the presence of another woman in their children's lives, and some may discourage children, actively or more subtly, from developing relationships with their step-mothers (Nielsen, 1999). Finally, there are many fewer step-mothers who live most of the time with their step-children. This means that the role is less understood than the step-father's role.

Conclusions

Step-parents enter the step-family as an outsider to the parent–child relationship and face significant challenges as they attempt to build relationships with children. Some step-parent–child relationships are troubled, while others become comfortable or close. Researchers and step-family therapists have concluded that it works best if step-parents can initially refrain from taking on a parenting role and spend time establishing a supportive relationship with their step-children. This can be more difficult for step-mothers to achieve as they often feel pressure to take on a parenting role for the children.

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