

# CLINICAL Update

California Society for Clinical Social Work



Volume XXXIX Number 2 • September 2009

## The Myth of Stepfamilies: What Every Therapist Should Know

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One out of every three people in the United States will live in a stepfamily at some point in their lives. That is a staggering statistic. Given that the divorce rate for first marriages is approximately 55%, many adults will either remarry or re-couple. If there are children, that means they will become part of a stepfamily system. With so many people in stepfamilies, it is becoming increasingly important for therapists to understand the dynamics of a stepfamily.

The stepfamily system is unique in that it offers challenges and complications that are very different from a nuclear family. But when stepcouples enter therapy, it is common for both the couple and the therapist to use a nuclear family as a template to address issues. That means communication dynamics that are unique to couples struggling with stepfamily issues are missed in the counseling, parenting suggestions are misdirected, and the stepparent often feels misunderstood. While we as therapists work with couples to help them be empathic and learn to communicate with one another, if we do not understand the dynamics they are struggling with, we miss being deeply attuned and empathic in a way that helps them feel truly understood.

There are several issues inherent to stepfamily life that do not exist in a nuclear family. In a nuclear family, a couple meets, falls in love and has children. Marital satisfaction starts out high, and naturally declines at the birth of the first child. In a stepfamily, couple satisfaction is already lower due to the struggles with the children and the ex-spouse. Then, at or about the time the couple moves in together or gets married, acting out increases by the children. That is even if, and sometimes especially if, the children and the "step" have gotten along before. This produces feelings of hopelessness, despair and worry that someone is doing something wrong. In a stepfamily, everyone is highly sensitive to rejection and loss, and struggling to get their needs met. Anger, hurt feelings and disappointment pile up very quickly, and there is often dissension within the couple, in the house, and between the stepparent and the children. Both the couple and the therapist often have ideas about how a stepfamily should operate that are nothing more than myths; these are false assumptions based on a nuclear family map. Some of these are illustrated below, along with the realities of those myths for couples in stepfamilies.

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Published by and for the members of the  
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## The Myth of Stepfamilies cont'd.

**Myth: Instant love.** This myth occurs on many levels: 1) The stepparent expects that she will love her stepchildren and then feels ashamed and hurt when it does not happen; 2) The bio parent hopes that his partner will see his children as cute and delightful as he does, and when the partner often doesn't, the bio parent feels hurt and dismayed that the person he loves cannot also love his children in some way; 3) The children will learn to love the stepparent. The bio parent might expect this and, if this does not occur, feel there is something wrong with his partner.

The reality is, in a stepfamily the new partner may start off liking the kids much more than she will later because there will be tension between the stepparent and stepchildren for a period of time. The older the children are, the harder the adjustment will be for them. There are many factors outside of what is happening within the couple that influence how the bond will form. The more loyal children feel to their other parent, the harder the adjustment. This loyalty bind in children often creates such confusion and uncomfortable feelings that it is easier to reject the stepparent in an effort to make her go away. So, it is difficult for children to "love" a new stepparent, and this expectation increases the guilt and bind the children are in.

Therapists can help couples correct the expectation of instant love. By doing that, the couple can come to understand that there is nothing inherently wrong with the stepparent if she doesn't feel loving and that there is nothing wrong with the children. This reduces the pressure on the family system. When couples know that it is more normal for there to be a difficult adjustment period, they can hold out the hope that, in time, a caring friendship may develop. As the couple also accepts the loyalty bind of the children, all may be better able to tolerate what can be a long and confusing adjustment period for the kids.

**Myth: The stepparent will have an instant parental role, including disciplining the children.** Many stepparents feel they will come in, "get the children in line," and be accepted as a parental authority, both by the children and their partner. They are often hurt and surprised when this is not the case. The bio parent typically struggles with the parenting criticisms of the stepparent, especially if the stepparent has never had children of his own. The stepparent often finds he has no authority in parenting his partner's children, even if he does have children of his own. The stepparent then struggles with having to deal with children that he is

supposed to care about, but with whom he can rarely have a parental role.

With younger children, experts all agree that, for the first few years, the bio parent should do the disciplining. With pre-teens and teens, the bio parent always does the disciplining. This is often difficult for bio parents after a divorce because many adults become more lenient in their parenting, particularly because they fear more loss. After a divorce, it is not uncommon for bio parents to get into the habit of sleeping with their children, giving them their full attention when they are with them, and allowing the kids to get away with things, sometimes to make up for the guilt of what their kids lost. While bio parents can have a high tolerance for what they decide to let their kids get away with, it is highly unrealistic to expect that a new partner will feel the same way.

Therapists can help the couple in several ways. We can help the bio parent understand that what the stepparent is often most desiring is a role in the family, and is searching for a way to become part of the family rather than an outsider. The bio parent can be encouraged to begin to parent with some more boundaries and rules, and can act together with the stepparent to think about rules of the house on which they could agree. This allows the stepparent to feel more connected to his or her partner.

***We can help the bio parent understand that what the stepparent is often most desiring is a role in the family, . . . rather than an outsider.***

**Myth: The ex-spouse will be appreciative of the stepparent's role in her child's life.** There are many divorced spouses who can handle their ex's new partner well, but there are equally as many who cannot. The ex may feel threatened by the other woman in her children's life, be angry that any adult who is not of her choosing has anything at all to do with her children, and feel fiercely protective. This puts the children in a struggle of loyalty binds and enables splitting, which often gratifies the parent who is struggling with accepting or even tolerating the "other" adult in her kids' lives.

It is ironic that even if the ex is the one who left the marriage, he still may not be willing to accept anyone in the role of the other father in his children's lives. This is exacerbated by the children at the beginning because anyone new in their life is interesting. This interest feels threatening to many ex-spouses because they fear being replaced. They have already been replaced in their partner's life and feel highly threatened that they are easily replaceable in their child's life.

We can help the stepparent deal with this by helping him accept the reality: the more generous a stepparent

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## The Myth of Stepfamilies cont'd.

is, the more of a threat it may be to the ex-spouse. This is a very difficult thing for stepparents, who already may be feeling rejected. However, the bio parent can be encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate his or her new partner's kindness, generosity and attempts. This also helps the couple build a boundary from allowing the ex to have too much influence on their couple relationship.

**Myth: The spouse will "forget" about his other family and completely devote himself to his new family.** In a stepfamily, the new spouse struggles with the idea that she is not number one to her partner, or that her partner is not solely devoted to her and their nuclear family when the new couple has children of their own. This myth sets the family up for tremendous struggle, leading to unhappiness, arguments and hurt.

While it might appear childish to someone who has not been in that position, it speaks to a person's need to be loved, considered and appreciated in a way that perhaps can only happen when a couple experiences all of its "firsts" together. To hear stepparents say, "I knew what I was getting into, but I didn't know it would be so hard to tolerate every day," is common, and requires empathy rather than judgment when we work with them. The truth is, being a stepparent is much harder than most people imagine. When that is understood, a stepparent can finally feel that he or she is not "bad" for having these feelings.

**Myth: Transitioning into a stepfamily will be fairly easy and will settle down quickly.** Both the bio parent and the stepparent get set up in this myth. At the beginning, everyone might actually get along and like one another. But it isn't until either the new partner moves in or the wedding date is set that what was once easy becomes an entirely different experience.

Research has shown that a stepfamily will go through several transition periods that will cause turbulence, and the family will not know when they will occur. These surprises upset the family greatly, and cause the partners to feel as though they have made a mistake. It is important for therapists to understand that these crisis points are normal for most stepfamilies. Educating the couple about this helps normalize what they are going through. While more than 60% of these marriages will fail, if we can hold the normalcy of this as a part of stepfamily life development, we can help contain the hope that "this too shall pass."

**Myth: The stepchildren will appreciate everything the stepparent does for them.** This is never true with anyone's children, but a stepparent struggles to understand why overtures of friendship are rejected by the children, or why the children are being rude or resistant. Urging from the bio parent to not take the child's rejection personally often does not help because of the energy and effort the stepparent is putting into forming some type of place in this new family. The

stepparent may then either become far more vocal (fight) or will want to get away (flight). This not only exacerbates the tension between the stepparent and the children, but also creates tension in the couple, particularly if the bio parent is not sensitive to how deeply rejected the stepparent feels.

The therapist needs to listen for this. While it is easier for a bio parent to accept some rudeness and acting out, it is much harder for a stepparent to tolerate because he wants to be accepted and appreciated for how hard he is trying to form a relationship. Stepparents may feel painfully misunderstood, hurt and unappreciated for their time and effort. We can help the bio parent to not just focus on what the stepparent is doing wrong, but rather focus on listening to how hard the stepparent is trying.

Even though this won't make everything better in the stepfamily, it will help build a closer relationship between the couple. We know that there is typical pre-teen and teenage behavior of being disrespectful and unappreciative. However, research tells us that it is very much directed at the stepparent in an attempt to get the stepparent to leave. So while some of the behavior is "normal," much of it is directed at the stepparent. As one researcher said, "If the children are over 12, don't move in until they've moved out!" These are the hardest years for a stepparent to be in a stepfamily system.

## Insider/Outsider Phenomenon

While this isn't classified as a myth, it is certainly an important phenomenon that occurs repeatedly in every stepfamily. The stepparent will struggle to feel like a part of the family system, but often feels left out of the bond between the bio parent and his children. The stepparent on one hand wants to "belong" in the same way so that she too becomes an insider, and often resents that she instead feels like the outsider. As a result, the stepparent who does not have any children of her own will withdraw, isolating herself from her partner and the children. If both partners have children, they will split along biological lines, and each parent will align and feel more connected to his or her own children and more disconnected from his or her stepchildren and partner.

This insider/outsider phenomenon also shows up when it comes to the unspoken family code. The parent with the biological children has a history full of memories, traditions and ways of doing things that is their family "code" (i.e., how to empty the dishwasher, which way the books on the bookshelves go). The stepparent not only isn't a part of that, but may want to have things done her way so that she feels like a part of the family. This is often exacerbated when the children visit. Then, the stepparent will often experience feelings of being the outsider because her partner and his children fall into an easy "rhythm" that is familiar to them. They know the "family" rules and, particularly at the beginning, are often resistant to too many changes, which keeps the stepparent as the outsider.

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## The Myth of Stepfamilies cont'd.

It helps to point out to the stepcouple that it takes time for new memories and traditions to develop before they can have history among them as a different family system. This can help prevent the bio parent from feeling guilty, angry and "caught in the middle." And it helps the couple consider slowly starting new traditions without changing everything at one time. As the therapist, if you are attuned to this dynamic, you will see it in play constantly. Just having it seen and understood will help the couple build some tolerance and we can help them begin to work together to come up with ways to begin that process.

When therapists develop an understanding of some of these vital stepfamily issues, they can become more empathically attuned to their clients, normalize many of these situations for them, and help with the anger and sense of hopelessness stepcouples often feel. Add these issues to the typical issues we see in couples and you certainly have your work cut out for you. While 60% of these partnerships will fail due to these stresses — which are often just too much for a marriage to sustain — we can at least offer stepcouples help in our understanding, compassion and empathy for taking on stepfamily life, and give those that will succeed the best chance we can.

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## West L.A. District Meeting cont'd.

professional interest in these phenomena and currently works for the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health's Genesis Program and **Ancy Cherian, Ph.D.**, staff psychologist at UCLA's Counseling and Psychological Services where she specializes in applying cognitive behavioral and acceptance based treatment strategies to a variety of clinical concerns including cluttering and hoarding. We meet at the home of Judy Messinger 3267 Corinth Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90066. 2 1/2 blocks south of National, 1block west of Sawtelle. Corinth does not intersect National. **Please RSVP to Judy at [messingerlcsw@yahoo.com](mailto:messingerlcsw@yahoo.com)** or (310) 478-0560. This presentation meets BBS requirements for Continuing Education credit. CSCSW members will receive 1.5 credits at no cost. Non-member LCSWs and LMFTs may obtain credit for \$15 (ask at the door for the non-member CE credit form).

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