



Stepfamilies — Navigating Uncharted Waters

“You are not my mother!” “They are not my kids! They are your responsibility!” These comments are often heard and spoken by children and adults who have found themselves in a stepfamily, perhaps trying to make sense out of new familial relationships, formed by the marriage or partnership of their parent with a new person other than their biological parent, or by the choice of a partner or spouse with children from a prior relationship.

For those of us in stepfamilies, there is no step-by-step manual to follow; we navigate uncharted waters.

While stepfamilies as a family structure have always existed, it was only in 2011 that stepfamilies were included in Canada’s Census of Population. With the number of children and adults in new stepfamily structures on the rise, it is important that we as therapists, pastors, teachers, and others, work to understand how we can be helpful and supportive to stepfamily members.

Research

Research indicates that stepfamily members are more at risk for health-related problems, mental health issues such as depression, stress-related problems that may affect work or school, conduct disorders, and substance abuse (Michaels, 2006). Along with greater stressors on stepfamilies, such as finances, co-parenting arrangements, and navigating new stepparent/stepchild relationships, it is important that we work to understand the complexities of this family structure.

While it may be only one member of a stepfamily who seeks help and support, it is important that all members in the family system work together to create a healthy family structure, where each family member is understood, heard, and respected.

Each stepfamily is unique, and the therapist or pastor should consider this an opportunity to offer to work and support the entire stepfamily system. Researchers note that the quality of the stepparent/stepchild relationship is a determinant of overall stepfamily ‘happiness’ (Preece, 2003).

It is important to remember that stepfamilies are built upon an experience of loss and that earlier losses will be re-activated when the new family structure is formed. Thus it is important that stepfamily members have the opportunity to engage, if possible, in a therapeutic process that addresses their issues of grief and loss, along with other emotional issues such as divorce, the death of a parent or spouse, or issues of violence and abuse. Researchers estimate that it takes two to five years for the process of structuring the stepfamily to stabilize.

Communication and conflict resolution are important issues for stepfamilies.

Working Together

It is important the entire stepfamily work together to commit to opportunities for meaningful communication among its members, such as scheduling regular family meetings. These meetings would ensure that all members are able to check-in with one another and to share important information. Since stepfamilies often juggle many schedules and activities, family meetings ensure that there is a regular time for all family members to connect.

Stepfamilies should also develop a conflict resolution strategy, which can also address issues of setting clear limits and boundaries for children. This helps to clarify expectations, and it also allows for contributions and input from all members, thus increasing potential investment in resolving conflict. Clinical work with stepfamilies necessitates a thorough assessment of the family system, with work on communication and conflict resolution skill development with all family members.

Boundaries must be clear and flexible, allowing for the growth and development of each family member and the family structure and for feedback to flow throughout the stepfamily system. Parents sharing custody and care of the children with their former partner must have clear parenting and co-parenting arrangements in place.

It is also important to note that given the many transitions experienced by children and youth in a stepfamily, that they are the most 'at-risk' and vulnerable members of the family. Thus teachers, pastors, therapists, and others should seek to provide care, support, and encouragement to children and youth in stepfamilies, as they deal with the many changes, disappointments, and transitions they have experienced.

IFL and Stepfamilies

By working to understand the experiences of stepfamilies and those we serve, we at IFL are able to support stepfamilies as they adapt and re-structure their family systems, providing an opportunity for each member to experience healing, meaning, and hope. This allows for shared experiences and the growth of new relationships and new memories for each family member.

This is important work that can make a difference in our churches, our schools, and our communities.

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For Further Reading:

Michaels, M.L. *Factors That Contribute to Stepfamily Success: A Qualitative Analysis*. Journal of Divorce & Remarriage. 2006: 44(3-4), 53-66.

Preece, M. *When Lone Parents Marry; The Challenge of Stepfamily Relationships*. Transition, Vanier Institute of the Family. 2003: 33(4), 7-10.

Suggested Reading:

Guide to Step-parenting & Blended Families (www.helpguide.org)

Fisher, Bruce and Alberti, Robert. *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends*. Impact Publishers, 2006.

Canada's Stepfamilies. Transition, Vanier Institute of the Family. Winter 2003-2004.



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