

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem:

Articles, written from a stepparent's point of view, often state that stepchildren, because of their outrageous behaviour and negative attitudes towards the stepparent, have been the primary cause of the downfall of an otherwise positive relationship. To date, little if any information has been made available as to the antecedents of that behaviour or if indeed, the stepchild's actions and/or reactions have been justified.

Parents have choices. Their choices may place them in a stepfamily union. Few children are given such a choice. Instead, they are dropped into a new family union and expected to be happy to have the opportunity to be included. Few, if any, are told when a relationship is about to become permanent or asked for their opinion on the event. Also, little consideration is given to the fact that this is a decision that will have a tremendous impact on their present life and future possibilities.

To be in a stepfamily, a child must have had to go through many transitions. "These transitions involve relocation, disorganization, reorganization of roles, relationship, terms of reference and personal belongings" (Fishman & Hamel, 1981; Visser & Visser, 1988 in Berger, 1994, p.36). Time with family and friends, new relationships, material wealth, personal time with their biological parents, and even health

and safety issues, can also be affected by this type of lifestyle change. It is not surprising that a child might feel frustrated, overwhelmed and/or resentful, especially when they have had virtually no input and often no pre-warning of the event.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research project is to determine how children presently in stepfamilies, and adult children of stepfamilies, feel about their experiences in a stepfamily union. The data collected will also be compared for similarities and differences of opinions at these two developmental levels.

Significance of the Study:

Questions, designed to gain information about children's experiences in a stepfamily union, were instrumental in determining that:

1. Grieving for lost family members does not end once a family has re-stabilized, but will continue until the child/adult has had an opportunity to explore her/his loss with a trusted adult or intimate acquaintance.
2. Initial family break-ups customarily follow physical or verbal abuse on the part of one or both partners.
3. In order to save face and/or gain control over a situation, adults will bully their children through put-downs, name-calling and embarrassing comments in front of others.

4. Children in a stepfamily union want time alone with their biological parent. They feel the need to demonstrate and receive affection from this person, and do not feel comfortable doing so with an audience present.
5. Stepchildren want their biological parent to have a chance at happiness and will often sacrifice their own comfort and/or happiness to ensure that this is possible.
6. Communication (knowing what's happening), favoritism and being accepted/treated as a family member, are the issues that stepchildren see as most needing to be addressed, in stepfamilies.
7. Few, if any, custodial parents pre-warn their children that a relationship is to become a live-in situation.
8. Stepchildren can readily identify a 'committed' relationship. They seem to know whether a partner will be permanent or temporary (just someone passing through). They also say that custodial parents "smarten up" (stop drinking and partying) when they were in a committed partnership and are more willing to discuss their relationship with their children.
9. Males, as youngsters, do not often discuss their 'hurts' (emotional distress) with others. They will instead, dissipate it through anger toward peers, depression, or else internalize it until a 'safe' person is made available to them. This may not happen until they, as adults, find a 'committed' partner.

10. The 'wicked stepmother/father' still lives. This persona is created when a stepparent sets out to discredit the stepchild for personal gain, or as a method of protecting her/his own, or her/his child's, position in the family.

11. Friendship clubs or sports groupings, which are organized as "family" relationships, encourage a child to be more responsible, confident and self-assured.

12. Stepchildren suggest that to be a successful stepparent, an individual should:

- Try hard to please her/his new partner

- Be affectionate with her/his new partner in front of the children. Show the children that you are happy together.

- Not be abusive or use threats and/or intimidation to end family issues.

- Not misuse alcohol or drugs

- Allow the child to get comfortable with them and not expect an instant "I like you and want you as my parent" response. Children need time and space to become comfortable with any new person in their lives.. Instead a stepparent should try to just be themselves; friendly, relaxed and comfortable in their new role -treat all of the children the same. Don't put your biological children at the top of every list.

- Get them something nice to show them that you want them to like you.

- Show the stepchildren that you feel they are part of the family. Invite them to meet your relatives and include them in extended family events
- Care about her/his new family and not be afraid to show it. If not comfortable with affectionate displays, the good stepparent shows s/he cares by her/his consideration of the stepchild's feelings, and by what s/he does for and with the stepchild.
- Be there for the stepchildren. Show your care and concern in positive inclusive ways. Be trustable.
- Spend time with ALL the children in the family and demonstrate her/his enjoyment at being with them.
- Communicate with their stepchildren. Treat them as responsible human beings and invite them to participate in family decision-making and problem solving
- Allow them more self-responsibility and independence as they enter their teen years. Having the right to make independent choices is particularly important to the Junior High student.