

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction:

A review of current literature was undertaken to determine what, according to present authorities, children's expectations of a stepfamily relationship are; how children describe their actual experiences in a stepfamily, and what recommendations for change, if any, have been suggested by researchers working in this area. To do this appropriately, it was necessary to understand the history of this alternative family structure, and how its development has affected the lives of the children participating in it.

The review was completed in six parts:

- Prevalence of stepfamilies
- Definitions used in current literature and in this study
- Transitions
- Children's stepfamily expectations
- Actual experiences in the literature of children in stepfamilies
- Changes recommended in the literature.

#### Prevalence of Stepfamilies:

Of the marriages that took place in 1980, remarriages accounted for 44%, a substantial increase from 1970. By 1982, one out of ten children were already in stepfamily unions and two in ten, who were then in a single parent family, could expect that in three years' time, they, too, would be members of a stepfamily (Glick, 1980 in

Dahl, Cowgill & Asmundsson, 1984). It wasn't surprising when, in 1994, the U.S. Bureau of the Census documented that the number of children living with their biological parents (in the United States) had decreased from 90% in 1970 to 69% (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor & Sturgess, 2001).

In that year as well, Britain's Office of the National Statistics indicated that 20%, of British children, were already living in a single parent household and that by the age of 16, more than one in eight British children would be living with a stepparent. These statistics were directly related to the rise in remarriage and/or cohabitation relationships (Dunn et al., 2001).

In Canada, by 2001, ten per cent of the total families were stepfamilies, and within this group of families, one-third included children from previous unions. Studies from the United States, available at that time, also reported significant growth in stepfamily unions. They indicated that 19 % of married couple households, containing children, were now stepfamilies (Glick, 1989 in Anderson & Greene, 1999) and that by 2010, stepfamilies could possibly outnumber biological families (Cornell, 2001)

These numbers underestimate current changes as they exclude de facto relationships (arrangements in which a stepfigure cohabits with a parent with residential children). This type of relationship is steadily increasing, and appears to be becoming the preferred way to begin a new family relationship. (Anderson & Greene, 1999).

While nuclear (two parent) households still represent the largest percentage of

family unions in Canada, and the United States, today's movement towards family dissolution by separation and divorce, followed by subsequent re-partnering, indicates that an ever-increasing population of children will experience an alternative family union before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. "Moreover, because divorces among remarriers occur somewhat more frequently and rapidly than for first married counterparts, one in ten children will experience two divorces of their custodial parent before the age of 16" (Furstenberg, 1988 in Anderson & Greene, 1999 p. 343).

"For better or for worse", the stepfamily is the family of the future...single parenthood, in which mothers are unmarried is increasingly common, and some divorced parents will remain single. But most single mothers and divorced parents eventually do marry or remarry and both create stepfamilies (Beer, 1989 pp. 1-2).

#### Definitions in the Literature and Used in the Current Study:

Most literature today, defines the stepfamily as a family in which at least one of the adults involved has been married at least once before, and has brought at least one child, from a previous relationship, into the marriage (Maddox, 1975; Visher & Visher, 1979; Beer, 1989; Ochiltree, 1990; Ritala-Kosinen, 1997; Anderson & Greene, 1999).

Other variants include:

- "A stepfamily is defined as a family suprasystem of more than one adult-led households who are involved with each other in sharing the care of the children" (Leahy and Wright, 1987 p. 317).
- Stepfamilies include those in which children live with a remarried parent and a stepparent; those in which children from a previous marriage visit their remarried

parent and stepparent, and those in which the couple is not married and children from a previous marriage either live with or visit the couple (Visser & Visser, 1979 in Prosen & Farmer, 1982 p. 393).

My study indicated the need for a more inclusive definition, as it revealed that the nature, of live-in relationships, is rapidly changing from one of remarriage:

- Three of the four adult participants (75% of past experiences), in the study, had had re-marriage stepfamily experiences while five of six child participants (83-1/3 % of present experiences) had only been participants in re-partnered stepfamily relationships
- Overall, 40% or 4 /10 had had remarriage relationship experience while 60% or 6/10 had only experienced re-partnering.

to one of re-partnering without marriage (de facto cohabitation and common-law relationships).

The definition, of the term stepfamily, chosen for this study, includes blended, restructured, re-partnered and re-married families. This inclusive definition was chosen to stress that all children, in re-structured families, go through similar experiences of grief and loss, re-adjustment and/or trauma. In this sense, all new family structures are equal. Which term (blended, step, re-marriage, common-law or re-partnering) is used to describe the regrouping process, is of little or no consequence. The important difference, is the number of transitions forced upon the child during her/his growing up years, and the cost (mentally, emotionally and perhaps physically) of those transitions to the child.

### Transitions:

According to current literature regarding stepfamilies:

The emerging marriage pattern is one in which a woman will have a child, either in or out of wedlock, by a man she is likely to live with for a period of time. They will separate or divorce, and the chances are overwhelming that she will be granted custody of the children. There follows a period of single parenthood, followed by a courtship and ultimately a cohabitation with a new partner, with or without the benefit of marriage. This new partner may bring children of his own from one or more previous liaisons. It is possible that the woman would also have a child with her new partner. The new marriage is no more likely to last than the previous one. She may redivorce, will probably retain custody of the offspring, and may well marry a third time. Thus, the marriage of the future will increasingly be “serial” marriages, in that they will take place in a series, one after the other (Brooks, 1985). These marriages are monogamous, because men and woman form relationships with one person at a time and, occasional adultery aside, remain with that partner exclusively until divorce. This is why the new pattern of marriage in America is referred to as “serial monogamy”.

Serial monogamy is the marriage trend of the future – whether comprising one, or more than one, divorce and remarriage. The family produced by these marriages is known by a more familiar name “the stepfamily” (Beer, 1989 p. 6-7)

Divorce, or the separation of a family, does not end in the courtroom.

Ramifications of this process create ripple effects that are felt by the family for several years afterward (Keidanren, 1991 in Burghes, 1994; Health Canada(HC), 2000). As suggested by Virginia Satir (1990) “The emotional levels one needs to work through during and following divorce (and separation) are very much parallel to the stages one goes through at the time of death” (Virginia Satir in Pogue, 1990 p. 4). Denial, anger, shock, bargaining, depression and final acceptance are all a part of this process.

Family life is also less cohesive after a separation. This is partly due to the range of emotions left over from the family upheaval and reorganization, and partly from family members’ preoccupation with individual concerns (Amato, 1987). In most

families however, members will experience emotional distress during the time immediately surrounding family dissolution but, if the period after the separation is not fraught with additional stressors, both parents and children will adapt to their new family situation within three years (Heatherington & Clingempeel, 1988).

Lynn (2000b), lists five factors that determine how successful a transition to a blended family will be. These are:

- The length of time that the adult and children have spent in a single parent family
- Roles of adults/children
- Age of children
- Attitudes and values of parents
- Pre-planning and preparation by both adults and children

Some studies suggest that maladjustment in children is directly related to the number of family transitions. Unfortunately, they don't specify if this maladjustment is due to stress related to divorce, the transition to a different living arrangement or other factors (Kurdek, Fine & Sinclair, 1994; Anderson & Greene, 1999). Other research indicates that the child's reaction to family break-up and re-structuring, is dependent partly on her/his age at the time (Beer, 1989; HC, 2000) and that younger children, more specifically those from age 3 to 6, are the most severely affected (Roberts & Roberts in Berner, 1992). Still others state that adolescents have the most traumatic experience during a family re-organization process (Fine, Donnelly & Voydanoff, 1991).

Not all stepfamilies have happy endings.

Parental affection, living space, friends and property are all objects of intense possessive feelings for children. Often these feelings are stronger because children have formed close ties to the custodial parent before the remarriage (or cohabitation), ties that are particularly binding because they follow the upheaval of bereavement, (separation) or divorce. A child's acceptance of a stepparent is usually a gradual process, if it ever takes place at all (Beer, 1989 p. xii).

In fact, approximately sixty percent of stepfamilies are dissolved before the relationship is five years old. And within that five years there can be a lot of physical and emotional conflict (Gilbert, 1982; Cornell 2001).

It should not be assumed however that all family dissolution is painful. Escaping from a violent family situation can be very positive even if the family re-organization, following this experience, is filled with stress related to financial concerns (Demo, 1993 in Burghes, 1994).

#### Children's Expectations of Stepfamily Inclusion:

The books, articles, and studies, accessible to me, gave almost no information on children's expectations (or knowledge) of live-in or stepfamily relationships. The two comments I did find were from:

1. A study of 30 families, conducted by Dahl, Cowgill & Asmundsson (1987), that stated many of the "adults told their children before anyone else soon after the decision to remarry" (p. 43) had been made. The written report does not clarify the actual number of parents to which this comment applies. I was impressed, however, by the positive results gained through this research and found that many of the recommendations matched those from my own study.

2. A study on family lives and friendships completed by Dunn, Davies, O'Connor & Sturges, (2001) in which data taken from 238 children was compiled. "Only 5% said that they had been fully informed or encouraged to ask questions about their family separation" (p. 11). The authors also cited Gorrell Barnes et al. (1998) by saying, "there is often a gulf between what an adult thinks has been communicated to a child - often in a single conversation – and a child's need to process the information in repeated conversations through time." (Dunn et al., 2001 p. 11).

As my review uncovered only two incidents that even mentioned children having prior knowledge of their parent's plans, I tend to believe, that children are seldom aware that a new live-in relationship is about to occur.

To be fair, adults sometimes think that they have told their children what they are planning to do, but when the children are asked what they have been told, they say, "Nothing". This has certainly occurred in my own counselling experience. Perhaps more parent education is necessary to ensure that effective, direct communication, takes place between parents and children. This type of communication would help to promote better stepfamily relationships in the future.

As statistical data is not readily available at this point, children's knowledge and expectations of a parent's upcoming union may prove to be one of the most important new areas for future research. It definitely has significant relevance for adults who are about to form a new stepfamily relationship.



Actual Experience in the Literature of Children in Stepfamilies:

There was very little stepfamily literature that focussed on a stepchild's experience. Most information was presented as research findings, or as suggestions for stepparents to consider, not as topical listings. Therefore, it was difficult to determine just what was actually happening from the child's viewpoint. Data, that I did find to be relevant to my own areas of investigation, has been summarized below.

Much of a child's life experience comes from their family. If the family is constantly in conflict, primary modeling of skills necessary for developing competence in relationships with peers, family and/or sexual partners, are never learned. Instead "early experiences of massive or recurrent change predisposes the child to chronic insecurity" (Ochiltree, 1990 p. 55).

Though most couples begin their blended families with good intentions, the road can be fraught with many difficulties. Take every problem possible in a biological family and magnify it....Normal rivalries become complicated when children haven't grown up with and developed bonds with stepsiblings. Also kids may struggle with jealousy at having to share the limelight with a stepparent and his or her children or feel displaced from their position as the eldest or the "baby" to that of the middle child. And the parents may find themselves polarized by battling children, questioning whether they've made the right decision (Cornell, 2001 p. 68-69).

Other issues, such as frequent moves with the obvious losses of friends, school, and community, forced sharing of personal space, and living in "someone else's home" (Dahl et al., 1987 p.41) were further complicated by differential treatment of biological and mutual children by parents and stepparents. Family size changes (Prosen & Farmer, 1982), as non-custodial stepchildren moved in and out of the home, also helped to create an overwhelmingly difficult first year.

Those families who followed Lynn's (2000a) blueprint for success:

- Absence of open conflict
- Continued good relations with each parent individually
- Close mother-child relationships
- Well organized and planned routines
- Good relationships with step-parents
- Continued presence and support of extended family

had fewer disagreements but still found family assimilation somewhat troublesome though "there were equally vivid accounts of how things had improved in two to three years" (Dahl et al., 2001 p. 41).

The available research actually said more about parenting styles than parent-child communication. For the most part, "the child perceptions and participation as a thinking active family member were ignored" (Hartup, 1979; Bell 1979 in Ochiltree, 1990 p. 16). Either stepparents and stepchildren interacted with each other indirectly (through the natural parent), treating each other as unavailable, or unreachable, communication partners (Berger, 1994) or information on upcoming events was not passed to the non-residential stepchild, e.g. "no one told her the baby was coming" (Phillips, 1986 p. 12).

Family separation, followed by a new partnership for her/his parent(s) brings many stressful changes into a child's life. Often these changes occur when the biological parents themselves are under tremendous stress and are not able to support the child's emotional needs (Phillips, 1986).

One factor that greatly contributes to the child's stress is the loss of a parent (death or separation). The non-custodial parent may have repartnered or be experiencing practical difficulties in maintaining a connection with her/his children. Money concerns may prevail and/or suitable meeting places may be difficult to find. Also, distance may create the need for fewer encounters between the non-custodial parent and child. Besides these problems, a child may find it emotionally overwhelming to visit her/his parent with "a new family" present. S/he may feel rejected, or abandoned, when other 'strangers' have more claim to her/his parent's time than s/he does, or be resentful that someone else's child is now her parent's "baby" while s/he has been demoted to the 'middle child' status (Phillips, 1986; Collins, 2001).

Sometimes a child's behavior may regress or change due to this stress. "Anxiety, sadness and depression, eating or sleeping disorders, school problems, overly aggressive behavior, alcohol or drug abuse, isolation from family and friends and other unusually persistent problems" (HC, 2000 p. 22) may occur. Also a child, who feels abandoned by a much-loved parent, may develop an intense yearning for that parent. When this happens, s/he will need to be assured that s/he is not responsible for the parent's departure; that s/he is still loved, and that an adult's choices are responsible for the present situation (HC, 2000). When a child cannot be consoled, professional help is necessary.

Professional help may also be needed to help the child cope with the multitude of losses experienced when a family re-organization takes her/him away from friends, well

known communities, schools and trusted associations. Also, if the child is against a parent's reattachment, or is still hoping for the original family to be re-united, a serious romance in her/his parent's life can be devastating as it brings an end to these hopes (Gilbert, 1982; Ochiltree, 1990; Cornell, 2001).

Authorities agree that there is tremendous guilt in stepfamilies.

The children sometimes think that their parent's first marriage broke up because of their behaviour. The biological parent is often beset by remorse at having disrupted the children's lives by the failure of the first marriage and the subsequent importation of a step-parent. The step-parent may be acutely conscious of the trouble that his or her arrival has caused, and of the unworthy feelings that he or she may have towards the children. Some of this guilt is appropriate...It is because guilt can translate into actions and attitudes that hurt the children, that it needs to be controlled (Collins, 1988 p.34).

Burghes (1994) tells us that

there is no straightforward relationship between family disruption, lone parenthood and outcomes for children, particularly when allowance is made for other social and psychological influence...(and that) some of the disparity in behavior and educational achievement was found to exist **before** the marital disruption had taken place (p. 23).

Other researchers suggest that children felt helpless, depressed and anxious as a result of the lack of control they have in a family dissolution and re-organization and that this sense of powerlessness is responsible for their reactions (Gilbert, 1982; Phillips, 1986; Berner, 1992).

"Children, themselves are the best people to comment on their own feelings and perceptions" (Amato, 1987 p.329) and they must be given the opportunity to do so. Their reactions and comments, in my own study, clearly suggest that they benefit by

having someone to confide in during the family dissolution and re-organization, and by developing a loving relationship with a stepparent who can “provide compensatory emotional support and companionship” (Amato, 1987 p. 329).

Researchers suggest that stepmothers have more difficulty with stepchildren than stepfathers and that stepdaughters had the most extreme reactions to stepparents (Ganong & Coleman, 1987) but “stepparenting, in general, is considered to be difficult due to negative stereotypes and role ambiguity surrounding stepparenthood” (Rollings, 1976 in Bryan, 1983 p. 15). The lack of clear roles and well defined boundaries puts added stress on the stepfamily and makes it difficult for stepfamily members to establish a sense of family identity and belonging (Prosen & Farmer, 1982; Phillips, 1986). This is more than understandable when we attempt to track family relationships.

(Even) If we consider (only) nonresidential arrangements, a number of possible relationships emerge: a residential biological mother and a nonresidential biological father, a residential stepfather and a nonresidential stepmother; and, an opportunity for five different types of siblings; full residential biological siblings - offspring of the previous marriage who are currently residential; residential half-siblings – the offspring of the current (re)marriage; residential stepsiblings – the offspring of the stepfather’s previous marriage; nonresidential half-siblings – the offspring of the biological father’s new marriage; and nonresidential stepsiblings – the offspring of the nonresidential stepmother. who become residential stepsiblings to the child during extended visitation within that household.

In addition there are extended family members...who play important roles. Children may have two sets of biological grandparents, and three types of stepgrandparents; the residential stepfather’s parents who are the biological grandparents of the stepfather’s children from the previous marriage and any half-siblings in the current marriage; the nonresidential stepmother’s parents who may be involved because of new offspring in the biological father’s household; and, the residential stepfather’s ex-spouse parents who may continue involvement with their biological grandchildren now residing with the target child (Anderson & Greene, 1999 p. 346).

Added to this confusion, “The complexity (of the stepfamily) causes children to swing between two households and experience duality in roles and rules” (Berger, 1994 p. 35). They may lose the power and status (more responsibility and say in decisions) they gained in a single parent home, when their custodial parent repartners (Solomon, 1995), due to the addition of another adult, or lose their place in the age hierarchy due to the addition of stepchildren. Because of this, a child who was formerly the “man of the house” or the oldest child may, with the organization of a stepfamily, be relegated to the role of the middle or youngest child. Yet, this same child may still hold the position of the ‘eldest’ in her/his other biological parent’s home (Beer, 1989).

Parents are also affected by family change. Some women, who out of necessity were in control in a single-parent family, may once again revert to the subordinate role in the stepfamily. Others may continue, in the dominant position, due to the reluctance of a new stepfather to assume authority over another man’s children (Ochiltree, 1990; Anderson & Greene, 1999). Stepfathers, with biological children in the stepfamily, may assume a greater parenting role and use their already well developed parenting skills to assume a more supportive relationship with their stepchildren (Anderson & Greene, 1999).

“There are (also) clear differences between biological parent-child relationships and steprelationships....Relationships between children and their stepparents are (usually) more disengaged than (those) between children and their biological parents” (Anderson & Greene, 1999 p. 348). “It is unrealistic to expect step-parents and step-

children whose relationship is a sequel to remarriage (or cohabitation) rather than a matter of choice on their part, to love each other” (Ochiltree, 1990 p. 10). It is unlikely to happen in the short term.

As an adult, who ‘steps’ in when the parent is absent, the stepparent has no legal rights over the stepchild. Consequently screams of “you’re not my parent” or “you can’t make me do that” are valid. The child is aware that step-parenthood is simultaneous with the new marriage (or partnership) and that their relationship with this person will end if they can undermine the marriage that created it (Maddox, 1975)

Children may be willing to accept a biological parent controlling their life, but most will be frustrated, by a “stranger” becoming too involved. They may want her/him to play the role of a friend and confidante instead (Prosen & Farmer, 1982; Collins, 1988; Fine, Coleman & Ganong, 1998) or to just leave them alone. Children may be more willing to accept direction from a stepparent when family rules have been clearly defined and are consistently applied, to both biological and stepchildren, by both resident parents (Bloomfield, 1993).

Ochiltree (1990) tells us that:

1. Continuous biological family conflict
2. High level of stepfamily stress
3. Lack of parent interest

are detrimental to a child’s adjustment to stepfamily life.

Strong, long-term hostilities between biological parents are a major source of stress for children. Effects of this type of conflict are evident at every developmental level. Very young (pre-school) children are unable to comprehend the issues and ramifications involved. Their response to constant parental strife is often “regressive behaviours, confusion, irritability and anxiety” (Prosen & Farmer, 1982 p. 394). Elementary children, are especially vulnerable to guilt and self-blame for on-going parental problems (Bray & Kelly, 1998; HC, 2000). At this age, children often feel they have initiated the family break-up with their behavior. They fear parental fighting, sensing that it means that they are no longer loved and/or may be rejected or abandoned (Ochiltree, 1990) by much loved parents. Pre-teens, although they are capable of more understanding of the family situation, are also emotionally unable to deal with it effectively. They may instead, convert their feelings of anxiety, sadness and pain into anger (physical and verbal) that is directed outward toward school friends, siblings and/or parents (HC, 2000). Conversely, they “may show their fears in ways that do not make them appear vulnerable or in need of help” (HC, 2000 p. 42), i.e., they become overly devoted to one parent or idealize the non-custodial parent (Prosen & Farmer, 1982). The cost, emotionally, of their involvement in parental conflicts, and custody problems, can be long lasting feelings of guilt due to the resulting loyalty conflicts they bear (Visser & Visser, 1979 in Prosen & Farmer, 1982; Anderson & Greene, 1990; HC, 2000).

Adolescents too, demonstrate, in their behavior, the stress caused by this type of hostile parent interaction. They may spend more time with peers, or create even more internal division by taking sides in a disagreement and then actively playing one side against the



other (McGoldrick & Carter, 1980 in Prosen & Farmer, 1982). Children at this age, “are not especially solicitous of their parents’ needs – though they are often very good at knowing what will make their parents uncomfortable and how far it may be safe to go”(Collins, 1988 p. 48) with this behavior.

Regular contact between non-custodial parents and their children is more likely to be beneficial if children are allowed to move freely between the homes of the two biological parents; if the parents observe each others’ rules and values, and if parental disagreements are NOT issues that are discussed in front of the children (Bray & Kelly, 1998).

Researchers found that for more than two years after a repartnering or remarriage, mother-child relationships were problematic. Girls, especially, were demanding, coercive and hostile. Boys, initially disengaged from the family but, over time, if the partnership began before adolescence, this behavior improved (Solomon, 1995).

Stresses and strains in the stepfamily (itself) can...(also) lead to undesirable and disruptive behaviors. These problem behaviors...may be adaptive attempts to cope with situational stresses or they may reflect more serious psychological distress” (Prosen & Farmer, 1982 p. 395). Being forced to share their biological parent (and their personal possessions) with strangers may cause stepchildren to feel rejected, abandoned, or even in competition with stepparents and stepsiblings, for the attention and affection of this parent (Dahl et al., 1987; Cornell, 2001). These intense feelings, if provoked when the

children are still suffering from the overwhelming loss of their original family, their home and their close friends (Ochiltree, 1990) may cause them to become emotionally overwhelmed. If not resolved, this overload of stress might lead to anxiety, social withdrawal, depression and lowered self-esteem or erupt as deviant behavior, substance use or early sexual behavior (Anderson & Greene, 1990). A close relationship with one parent, usually the custodial parent, is the best source of protection for the child against these feelings of resentment (Solomon, 1995).

Household disagreements over discipline and independence for adolescents and younger children, may be exacerbated by problems in collecting child care support payments, money leaving the home to support children outside the home, and consistency in family roles and rules.

Also the “age appropriate need of adolescent children for autonomy, privacy and reaching out towards society is in conflict with the need of the young stepfamily system, created by (repartnering or) remarriage, to pull family members together, integrate and promote cohesiveness and bonding” (Berger, 1994 p. 36). Consequently, “adolescents, who are seeking their own independence, ...perceive (repartnership or) remarriage negatively and thus experience (related) stress, particularly if the new step-parent attempt(s) to impose control and discipline” (Jones, 1978; Ferri, 1984 in Ochiltree, 1990 p. 57).

Even more problematic than adolescence, is the reaction of the youngest child, in a stepfamily union, to the oldest mutual child (child of both parents in a stepfamily

union). Being displaced as the "baby" by a child who has claim to this position in both families, usually creates much jealousy and animosity. Fortunately, subsequent births do not create a similar reaction (Bernstein, 1988).

There is no reason to believe that all remarried (or repartnered parents)...who are awarded custody of their children are uniquely motivated...by the best interests of the child" Solomon, 1991 in Solomon, 1995 p. 95). Often revenge, competition, or spousal punishment, form the basis of their desire to gain custody. Some of these parents are "unwilling to make the child a priority over their working and social lives" (McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1986 in Solomon, 1995 p. 95). Also after repartnering, some mothers become jealous of the child-stepfather relationship, or resent the time taken from their new relationship to care for their child, and want the child to leave (Crosby-Burnett and Ahrons in Solomon, 1995). Children, in these situations, suffer long-term stress and may be devastated by the uncaring attitude of their parent. They will need the support of outside groups, friends and, most likely, professional counselling to maintain their sense of well-being (Ochiltree, 1990).

Children who experienced stepfamily relationships and retained a high level of self-confidence, had sufficient outside support from family, friends and group involvement to offset any negative experiences. They also were encouraged, through a supportive family environment, to actively express their dissatisfaction and attempt to deal with their difficulties through discussion with parents and family members (Ochiltree, 1990).

Sexuality can also become a problem in stepfamilies. There is more than one reason for this (McGoldrick & Carter, 1980 in Prosen & Farmer, 1982), but in most cases presented in the literature, one of the following situations was present:

-A stepchild's loss of partnership status

This partnership relationship may occur in the single parent family where the child and parent have relied on each other for emotional support, sharing of household duties and for the performance of community obligations for a significant period of time. If the parent decides to cohabit with a new partner, this child's adult status is reduced or deleted, leaving her/him feeling rejected and /or jilted in favor of this new person. Often the child will react with anger and refuse to have anything to do with the new stepparent. S/he becomes, instead, a competitor for the attention of her/his parent and may manipulate the household situation negatively in order to 'get rid of the competition' (Visher & Visher in Phillips, 1986; Visher & Visher, 1986 in Solomon, 1995; Bloomfield, 1993).

-Attraction, by a stepparent to a stepchild who is a younger version of a new mate

New stepparents are often surprised and often horrified to notice they have sexual feelings toward a stepchild. Feeling guilty is not the answer. Rather, the issue is how to control these feelings, avoid acting them out, and yet allow the growth of a warm personal relationship (Bloomfield, 1993 p. 176).

-The beginning of a sexual attraction between stepsiblings.

Stepfamily relations call into question many assumptions about sexual taboos, especially those regarding relations between unrelated siblings. Living in the same

household, perhaps in close proximity to one another, both day and night, a relationship that started as a friendship, between adolescents, may rapidly escalate into a physically stimulating interaction. Trying to avoid one another, and yet remain 'members of the same family', is a highly stressful situation for the adolescent. If parents have not arranged space appropriately (bedrooms at opposite ends of the house; use of different bathrooms), and have not set clear boundaries about what does and does not happen in the home, it is unlikely that these children will be able to continue their relationship without sexual complications (Lutz, 1980 in Beer, 1989; Phillips, 1986; Bloomfield, 1993; Bray, 1998).

-Sexual abuse, of a stepchild, by a stepparent.

Most inappropriate sexual incident(s)...take place between a stepfather and a stepdaughter. While sexual feelings toward stepdaughters are normal, some stepdads fail to deal with their feelings of attraction in a healthy way....The incidence of a stepfather sexually molesting a stepdaughter is significant. Stepfamilies must confront this potentially volatile and explosive issue early on...it is advisable to have honest discussions about privacy and propriety early in the formation of a stepfamily (Bloomfield, 1993 p. 180).

Therefore, it is vitally important that parents and stepparents are honest and open with both their partners and the children in their care. If boundaries are not set early in the relationship, children are unsure of the recourse they have in an uncomfortable or harassing situation.

Adults too can suffer due to the 'silent' attacks (sexual and emotionally manipulative) of their stepchildren. In this situation, they can appear as the guilty member to a protective spouse (Bloomfield, 1993).

Other situations are also possible. Parents must be aware of potential harm from:

-Sexual partners, and/or close friends, who see them only as immediate access to the children in their care. Single parents, who often need assistance with childcare (babysitters), due to financial strains, are very much at risk in this area.

-Sexually aggressive adolescents who may use their family position or parent absence to take advantage of other children (Leahy and Wright, 1987).

Children must be informed that this is not appropriate behaviour and that it is okay to “tell” their parent, or trusted confidant, if ANYONE is asking them to, or making them, do things that they do not feel comfortable with, or do not wish to do.

#### Changes Recommended in the Literature:

After reviewing the stepfamily information available to me, I found that the following points were often cited as areas in which positive change could benefit relationships within the stepfamily.

- Respect for the past history of your new family

Learning to live with another person takes time. Before you try to change anything, please take the time to observe, examine, and learn about the routines that bind your spouse and your stepchildren. If you suddenly start changing things, you may be treading into deep water and upsetting sensitive burial grounds that existed long before you arrived on the scene (Ziegahn, 2001 p. 5).

Children, because of their divided loyalties, need some time to shift comfortably from one relationship, involving mother and stepfather to another involving father and stepmother. Even in the best of relationships, children may need time alone

so that they can make the physical and psychological transition (Phillips, 1986 p. 15) from one home to the other.

- “Communication is the key” (Gilbert, 1982 p. 117) to successful relationships,  
”Because we best see the light with our eyes wide open” (HC, 2000 p. 55).

Talk a lot and try to listen. Be honest with your stepchild and be open to hearing what s/he has to say, even if her/his opinions do not match your own. Remember that communication isn’t just something you do to start a new relationship on a smooth road, it’s a lifetime tool (Gilbert, 1982; Phillips, 1986; Ochiltree, 1990; Berner, 1992; Berger, 1994; HC, 2000; Dunn et al., 2001; Ziegahn, 2001). “Communicating with your (step) children is how you build their trust and sense of security and (also) assure them that their needs will be taken care of “ (HC, 2000 p. 14) now and in the future.

- Status as a family member

Children want and need to have an active role in decision-making that impacts on their lives. By allowing their input, you tell them that you feel they are responsible decision-makers and valued members of the family “team” (Ziegahn, 2001).

A willingness of the parent and stepparent to discuss relevant issues and compromise on some points, while setting reasonable limits that validate the teenager’s need for responsible independence, will help her/him adapt to her/his new stepfamily circumstances.

- Co-parenting successfully.

Struggles with children are normal. In stepfamilies, struggles are something that

you can handle successfully through preparation or, unsuccessfully, if you are unprepared and panic.

The first thing to remember is that your (step) child is also a member of another family and that family, especially the non-custodial parent, has a claim on her/his time and loyalties.

Secondly, “Do not talk against the child’s (absent) father or mother. Children can see for themselves the faults of parents, but they need admiration for this person” (Gilbert, 1982 p. 67). Putting the other parent down or reacting verbally to her/his comments does not make you look good. Instead, it hurts your (step)child to know that you think poorly of someone they love. If your relationship with her/his other parent is positive; you communicate with her/him on a regular basis (about your child’s needs); allow the child easy access to both homes, and develop consistent two home rules wherever possible, you will be providing the security and stability that your child needs in her/his life (Gilbert, 1982; Berner, 1992; Berger, 1994; HC, 2000; Cornell, 2001; Ziegahn, 2001).

Thirdly, realign extended family relationships to keep your child connected to her/his former life. Don’t let your own frustration and/or issues with your ex-spouse, or his family, separate your child from the love and affection that s/he craves. Grandparents, friends, and other close relations are important to children. They assist in providing emotional support at a time when her/his world is reeling with unwanted change (HC, 2000).



- Bonding with your stepchild.

Give the stepchild time and space to get to know you as a person. They have suffered many losses and may need time and space to effectively grieve these issues. A long and relaxed period of adjustment also gives you (the new stepparent) a greater chance of being accepted for who you are, rather than being looked upon as the “invader in my home” (Phillips, 1986; Dahl et al, 1987; Cornell, 2001; Ziegahn, 2001).

Becoming a stepparent means a great many things, but one thing it doesn't allow you is automatic unconditional love privileges...stepparents soon discover that it takes more work to achieve a positive image in their stepchildren's eyes than they ever imagined (Ziegahn, 2001 p. 187).

Children, after a series of hurts, losses and disappointments, won't readily trust that a new person, in their parent's life, will be there for them when they need emotional or physical support. They “need to know where they fit in, and to be assured that they are wanted (and valued)” (Phillips, 1986 p. 9). It requires a great deal of time and effort, on the part of the stepparent, to build this type of a trust relationship, but it is an effort worth making (Collins, 1988; Ochiltrie, 1990; HC, 2000; Cornell, 2001).

Also, as a stepparent, you may have to admit that you don't love your stepchild with the same devotion that you feel for your own children. This is normal but, you can still treat them fairly, enjoy being with them and concentrate on getting to know them as individuals instead of “add-ons” to an adult relationship.

- Parenting Abilities

“In discussing criteria for choosing a new mate, “good parenting abilities” was

mentioned most frequently by both men and women; they wanted a partner who could understand and assist in the care of the children” (Berger, 1994 p. 41). In a stepfamily situation, good parenting includes all of the following:

1. Decide on the rules as a family, and then present a united front when maintaining them. If a child is traveling between homes, discuss rules and reasons for them with the non-custodial parent to heighten consistency and stability (Cobia & Brazelton, 1994; Cornell, 2001). Inconsistencies, between residences, are confusing for the child.
  2. Be fair, but be in charge.
  3. Not allowing yourself to be manipulated into the battles between your kids.
  4. “Don’t sweat the small stuff” (Cornell, 2001 p. 71). Save your energy for the battles that really matter. A cluttered bedroom is not an important enough issue to risk jeopardizing the positive relationship you’ve worked so hard to build.
  5. Use discipline tactics that are age relevant, i.e., grounding for adolescents. “Children favor disciplinary tactics that are congruent with their parent’s approach” (Morin, Milito and Costlow, p. 287).
  6. Demonstrate good relationship skills to your (step)children. Don’t be afraid to show affection to your mate in front of the children. “If your stepchildren see that you love their parent, often they will believe that you are capable of loving them, too (Ziegahn, 2001 p. 35).
- Roles – Replacement Parent Status.

The stepparent enters a family group that already has a shared history, strong

bonds and an established way of operating. Children, in the family, who have not yet accepted their parent's interest in dating other people, will have problems adjusting to a newly blended family, and a permanent stepparent.

Remarriage leaves no hope that the biological parents will reunite and forces the child to let go of the fantasy that this is still possible. It is important at this time, therefore, that the stepparent acknowledges that her/his role is not that of a replacement parent and avoids adding to the child's distress (Ochiltree, 1990; Fine, Coleman & Ganong, 1998; HC, 2000).

- Professional support

Clinical work with children indicates that they often require help to make sense of the changes in their lives. They may avoid expressing their concerns directly to the adults in their life, for fear of losing their relationship with them, or being misunderstood. Health Canada (2000) suggests that a child who feels s/he has been abandoned, or has lost contact with a parent, may develop an intense yearning for that parent that never goes away. This yearning can interfere with both school and emotional development and needs to be addressed through counselling and family support.

It is especially important that a child, going through changes in her/his home life, is assured by the parents, and support people, that s/he was not the cause of the parent leaving; that s/he is very much loved, and that the present confusion is due to adult choices and not something that the s/he has done or could have prevented (HC, 2000; Dunn et al., 2001).