

## CHAPTER V

### Stepfamily Definition:

The definition, of the term stepfamily, used in 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

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the experiences of adult children from a stepfamily background, and children presently living in a stepfamily. All data were analyzed to answer the following questions before being compared for similarities and differences. Responses were varied due to the open-ended questioning technique and conversational format utilized in the interview process.

### General Background Information

1. Please describe who you are now (age, profession and background information) and at what age you were when you entered a stepfamily.
2. How would you describe your stepfamily?

### Expectations

1. What were your expectations of this new stepfamily relationship?
2. When you first became part of this family, what were your expectations? Your hopes?
3. How did this experience meet your expectations?

### Actual Experiences

1. What actually happened?

### Recommended Changes

1. If you were beginning a stepfamily, coming from your own childhood experience, what would you change? Improve? Do more effectively?

### Summary of Findings:

#### Background Information:

Ten voluntary participants, four adults and six children, took part in this study. Six (60%) entered a stepfamily after the divorce of their biological parents. Two (20%) were born, out of wedlock, to parents who had never married, and then were introduced to stepfamily life through the re-partnering of their biological mother. The remaining two participants entered a stepfamily after the death, of one parent, was followed by a re-partnering of the remaining one.

Multiple unions were experienced by four (40%) of the ten volunteers (Developmental and gender distribution were equal.). Because of this, volunteers actually participated in twenty stepfamily unions. Also, two (50%) of the four adults

(both males) were now stepparents themselves.

All volunteers, except one (death of a foster parent), described some form of family discord (fighting, arguing, physical and/or verbal abuse) prior to the initial break-up. In all of these situations, the children did not realize that this type of parental interaction would ultimately lead to a family split.

When a man and woman decide to part, it's often after an extended period of unsatisfactory relations, continued disagreement over family issues, or some form of abuse (verbal, physical, mental or substance). More often than not, the decision is made at the adult level with no consultation, explanation or discussion with the children.

Analysis, of the data from this study, supports this statement. In 10 initial family break-ups, only one child was informed of the parents' decision to part. She was the older child (the youngest was not told) of a two-child family. This information was supplied, only a few hours before the actual split, so that the girl could make a decision about her future residence. At age seven, this was a rather traumatic way to begin a new life.

Two of the volunteers were very young at the time their families dissolved. Two more, suffered the loss of a parent. Five, of the original 10, were of an age to understand the situation and yet were not told

This pattern was repeated in the failure of new family structures as well. In seven of the eight times that newly reconstructed relationships failed, the children were not consulted or informed that their new family was no longer viable. As some of my

volunteers said, "Things just happened."

Family re-structuring, based on all 20 stepfamily unions, was as follows:

Re-partnering - 65%

Re-marriage - 35%

and included:

- 6 Single re-partnering experiences
- 4 Multiple re-partnering experiences with 9 transitions. In all 4 cases, both biological parents developed relationships simultaneously.
- 3 Single re-marriages
- 2. Multiple re-marriages

All the children in the study, except one, were in re-partnered family situations. Conversely, all of the adults (although 2 of them had been in re-partnered households), as children, were in re-married families.

Transitions were further complicated by the inclusion of 34 sibling relationships.

14/34 or 41.18% brothers and sisters

6/34 or 17.65% foster brothers and sisters

8/34 or 23.53% mutual children

6/34 or 17.65% half-siblings

Of these 34 children, 16 or 47.1 % were boys and 18 or 52.9% were girls. All foster siblings (5 girls and 1 boy) were members of one household.

Statistics, from this study, suggest that the trend today is toward the looser

structure of a re-partnered stepfamily. Commitment, instead of coming in the form of a marriage bond, appears to come from a determined effort, over time, to form a strong family bond.

### Expectations

Probe: What were your expectations of this new stepfamily relationship?

The 10 study participants had been members of 20 stepfamily unions. In 16 or 80% of the cases explored, children were not told that a live-in commitment was being arranged so they had no positive or negative expectations. Only 4 or 20% were knowledgeable of their parent's plans. Interestingly enough, these 4 situations have proven to be long-term committed relationships. One of these, the only re-marriage, is now in its 17<sup>th</sup> year.

Participants' comments suggested that when children are informed that a new stepfamily relationship is being considered, they felt more positive about the situation and were pleased to be included in the final decision.

Probe: When you became a part of this family, what were your expectations?

In 5 of the 20, stepfamily unions, children were not expecting anything of the relationship. The reasons for this were:

1. The child was totally unaware of what was happening. She only saw the connection as friendship building for herself, not as an adult relationship.

2. The child was too young to draw conclusions
3. The child did not see the woman as his stepmother because of her child-like unsophisticated ways
4. The child was too busy enjoying the present experience to equate it to future expectations
5. The child didn't enjoy his situation, but as it was a weekend visitation rather than a custodial stepfamily, he did not assign expectations to it.

Probe: How did this experience meet your expectations?

It was interesting to note that in all relationships except two, expectations of the children after entering the family proved to be accurate. Successful relationships had been seen as positive and relationships that ultimately failed, had been described in negative terms

The two exceptions were:

1. A situation, in which Mom's boyfriend had been nice to the children before moving in, but after one week in the live-in relationship, he began to take control of the household, made new rules without discussion with the family, and tried to isolate Mom from her children.

2. A stepfamily relationship in which the son returned home and found that he had a new stepparent. He had contempt for her as a stepmother initially but later learned to respect her because of what she had accomplished for his family.

Further research might attempt to clarify why this happened. “Did the children try harder to please the stepparent when they felt s/he was a good person?” or were they just very perceptive in pre-judging the relationship and/or the stepparent in a negative way?

#### Actual Experiences:

The population, used in this study, was diverse in both economic backgrounds (Well off financially to Social Assistance) and in stepfamily experiences. All were Caucasian.

Most participants had a single stepfamily experience while others had as many as 4 different family re-groupings. Of the latter participants, 3 were involved in re-partnering situations, with both biological parents, in the same time period.

Actual experience interview notes (written in some detail in the Results section of this study) reveal the following comparisons:

Figure 10: Experiences in a Stepfamily

	Adult Participants	Child participants	Combined
Good Relationship With Final Stepparent	3/10 (30%)	6/10 (60%)	9/20 (45%)
Wicked Stepmother	1/10 (10%)	3/10 (30%)	4/20 (20%)
Abused in the Relationship	3/10 (30%)	4/10 (40%)	7/20 (35%)
Single Stepfamily Relationship/participant	2/4 (50%)	4/6 (66-2/3%)	6/10 (60%)
Single Stepfamily Relationships/total Relationships	2/10 (20%)	4/10 (40%)	6/20 (30%)
Multiple Stepfamily Relationships/participant	2/4 (50%)	2/6 (33-1/3%)	4/10 (40%)
Multiple Stepfamily Relationships/Total Relationships	2/10 (20%)	2/10 (20%)	4/20 (20%)
Single Re-partnering Relationship/participant (2 had both parents involved)	0/4 (0%)	5/6 (83-1/3%)	5/6 (83-1/3%)
Re-partnering Relationships/ Total Relationships	5/10 (50%)	9/10 (90%)	14/20 (70%)
Successful re-partnering Relationships/Total Re-partnering	1/5 (20%)	6/9 (66-2/3%)	7/14 (50%)
Remarriages/participant (one adult had 2 parents remarry)	5/4 (110%)	1/6 (16-2/3%)	6/10 (60%)
Remarriages/Total Relationships	5/10 (50%)	1/10 (10%)	5/20 (25%)



Successful Remarriages/ Total Remarriages	4/5 (80%)	1/1 (100%)	5/6 (83-1/3%)
Successful Re-marriages	3/4 (75%)	1/1 (100%)	4 /5 (80%)
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The conversational style of the interviews allowed the participants to react to questions and comments as they would to an every-day conversation. As a result, the researcher became aware that volunteers demonstrated a commitment to three of the family member inclusion structures outlined by Gross in 1987. These were:

Retention: 6 (60%) or 4 children and 2 adults (4 males and 2 females)

In retention children include both their biological parents in their definition of “members of my family”. A stepparent is not included.

Substitution: 4 (40%) or 2 children and 2 adults (1 male and 3 females)

In substitution children in stepfamilies exclude at least one biological parent and include at least one stepparent in their definition of “members of my family”.

Augmentation: It was interesting to note that 2 of the children now in Retention were leaning towards an Augmentation structure due to a new, and very positive, parental re-partnering situation.

In augmentation, children in stepfamilies identify both their biological parents and at least one stepparent in their definition of “members of my family”.

Children, currently in stepfamilies, favored the retention definition of “members of my family” while adults were split in their choices between retention and substitution.

It is very possible, that if this topic was explored at a later date, with the same participants, the children's choices would be more equally distributed.

Conclusions:

Stepchildren are more likely to have a positive experience in a stepfamily when the following conditions exist:

1. Children are told about the family break-up in advance, and are assured that it is not their fault.

When children are unaware of the reasons behind a family dissolution, they often assume that they are at fault, e.g., that the break-up was caused by something they have or have not done. If a discussion with a trusted adult or intimate friend is not immediately available to them, they may carry this burden of guilt for many years.

2. The stepchildren are given status as equal family members and included in all extended family activities.

When stepchildren were given definite status within the family and allowed time to adjust to the new relationships inherent in that family structure, life could be as positive and fulfilling as it had been in their nuclear families.

3. Key to the success of a stepfamily union, was the role assumed by the stepparent.

Stepchildren viewed a successful stepparent as a person who demonstrated affection and caring for both her/his new partner and for all the children in her/his care.

This person did not expect instant recognition as the parent. S/he was willing to earn the respect of the stepchildren by relaxing with them, being there for them if they had need of support, and by treating them as responsible human beings, who were capable of participating, as valued members, in family affairs.

4. Stepchildren had access to private time with their biological parent.

Stepchildren were expected to share all their waking hours with strangers. Often even their belongings, and private space (bedrooms) became community items. What they resented most was the sharing of their biological parent on a 24 hour basis. Time alone, with this parent, to discuss their fears, losses, or even to receive a hug, was often not allotted to them. They didn't want to be expected to share their innermost thoughts in front of strangers, they needed to be able to give and receive affection from their biological parent, in private.

5. There was open communication and easy access to the non-custodial parent, loved relatives, and other associates from the nuclear family unit.

Children who were not allowed this access often grieved their losses for many years. Family discussions or counselling before, during, and after a family split might provide insights into the amount of contact a child required to be reassured, that participating in a new family structure didn't negate the love and caring originally available to them, from their nuclear family.

Recommended Changes:

Study participants, at both developmental levels, voiced similar concerns as their priorities for needing change (see figures 7 and 8). They saw open communication within the family, i.e., being included in family discussions, problem-solving and decision-making; avoiding favoritism of mutual and/or biological children, and giving stepchildren definite status as family members, as essential to the success of a strong stepfamily unit. Next in importance, for the adult participants, was responsible parenting.

Secondary issues, for the younger participants, were being loved and respected by their stepparent. They shared the adult participants' concern that stepchildren needed to be given more independence and responsibility as they matured, but also expressed a desire to be given a similar level of respect, as that expected from them, by the adults in their home.

It was also important to these children that a stepparent didn't come into the relationship with the expectation of 'instant' parenthood. They were clear in their explanations that a substitute parent was a person who earned your trust over time, not someone who demanded a parenting position because of their relationship with your custodial parent. They didn't appreciate being thought of as an add-on to a relationship. It was important to them, that their presence be valued and desired, not just necessary. They wanted to be able to trust their stepparent, to spend quality time with them, and to have the stepparent demonstrate concern for their well being by taking care of their everyday needs. They had experienced concerns over health and safety issues, and their

right to participate in legal proceedings, in the past, and now wanted some assurance that these issues would be considered of primary importance by their custodial parent, stepparent and/or legal personnel.

These children also stressed the importance of having designated private time with their biological parent. They needed to be able to give and receive affection, and to discuss their fears and losses with this person. It was distressing for them, because they were now in a stepfamily situation, to have to share even innermost thoughts and feelings before strangers.

Other issues seen as necessary components to a stepchild's wellbeing, were open and easy access to non-resident parents, and open communication lines between biological parents.

Adult participants saw all 5 of their remaining concerns as having similar importance. These items had proven to be significant factors in their own stepfamily experience.

1. There should be open communication between family members and easy access to parents. Adult stepchildren stressed that a good stepparent tries to build a closer relationship with their non-custodial children.
2. Independence and self-responsibility. Adult stepchildren think stepparents should allow stepchildren the right to make choices on issues relevant to them and the right to voice their opinions on family matters.

3. Stepparents should work to make the home a calm, comfortable place where stress is kept to a minimum.
4. Stepparents should work to build a 50/50 relationship. There should be joint decision-making in parenting of mutual, biological and stepchildren.
5. There should be access to counselling for all family members before, during and after the initial family break-up.

#### Additional Findings:

Twenty-eight additional points were isolated from the study data. Most, through the intensity and clarity of their delivery, revealed stress points for children in a re-structured family setting and gave the researcher added insight into how dramatic and often how hurtful, a family split can be. Others provided further elaboration on specific topics that the study participants felt were important because of their own experiences.

A summary of these points follows:

##### 1. Traumatic Events

Some of the children in this study were able to remember traumatic events from a very young age. The more dramatic the event, the stronger the recollection of it was. It is important therefore that we, as adults and professionals, realize that age is not insurance against long-term emotional upheaval, and remember to counsel very young children, in times of crisis, as we would their older siblings.

2. Grief and Loss - The loss of a family, loved friends and relatives, and a home location

a. Some stepchildren still grieve the loss of their biological home many years after it no longer exists. They desperately miss their connection with a previously affectionate parent, other family members, friends and/or trusted associations. If this loss is permanent, e.g., from the death of a parent, and they have no access to a trusted adult or intimate friend to discuss this with, they may internalize their grief, become severely depressed and lonely, or blame themselves for events that they could not control. Even enjoying a relationship with a stepparent may create loyalty conflicts for a child who sees this friendship as a betrayal of the biological parent.

b. Males in the study demonstrated through their answers that they internalized their grief and loneliness more than females. They tended to make light of their emotional hurts and disappointments, unless asked directly about them. Often, they would not openly question a parent's comments or reactions to their behavior, even if they were unsure of the reason for them, e.g., one adult, in this study, was unaware of how he had come to be in a permanent foster home. He wondered about it a lot, especially when he was threatened that he could be sent back; yet never asked for an explanation.

c. Children should not be used as messengers and/or intermediaries for separated parents. They cannot solve adult problems and should not be required to carry guilt when their efforts to do so are unsuccessful.

### 3. Family Membership

Participants in this study suggested that:

- a. Children want to be a member of their own family (one in which a biological parent is present), no matter what hardships exist.
- b. A gradual move to a stepfamily is best.
- c. Children will sometimes accept membership in a stepfamily because they admire one of the people in that family, e.g., a stepsibling.
- d. Gifted children who live in stepfamilies where other members do not match them intellectually often feel lonely and isolated. A challenging and supportive outside group (friends, wrestling club) can alleviate this problem and reinforce their self-confidence and appreciation of who they are as an individual.

### 4. Abuse - by parents, stepparents and/or caregivers

Privacy issues, create openings for abuse, guilt and fear. Children need to be made aware that keeping things “in the family” is not necessarily a good thing. If a parent abuses a child verbally, physically or mentally, to maintain control or win a competition, the child needs to know that this is not appropriate behavior, and should not be accepted, because a parent has been loving at other times.

- a. Stepchildren will sometimes suffer abuse (verbal, physical) at the hands of a stepparent and not complain if they are unsure of their relationship status with the custodial parent or if they see this relationship as important to their parent.



## 5. Role Models

a. It is important that stepparents model responsible parenting skills. Children, when they were forced to make several family transitions, often missed learning basic parenting skills from their biological parents.

b. Stepchildren know which partner will stay for the long-term, if invited. They were able to list what they saw as the positive traits necessary to be a good stepparent and insisted that a stepparent should not expect to be an instant replacement parent but should relax and just enjoy being with her/his new family. They also clearly outlined the characteristics of the “wicked stepmother” (see additional findings in Chapter IV) from their own experiences.

c. Stepchildren suggested that parents and grandparents are not necessarily biological relations. They are the people who are there for you as you are growing up.

## 6. Relationships

a. Children may work to prevent a parent re-partnering. This occurs when they hope that their biological parents will re-unite. Allowing the children to see that their parent is happy with her/his new partner, and also allowing them time to become comfortable with her/him, before a commitment is made, will help to alleviate this problem.

b. Most of the biological parents in this study, forgot to inform their children of an anticipated live-in relationship. Participants’ comments suggested that when children

are informed that a new stepfamily relationship is being considered, they are more positive about the situation.