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# Stepfamilies

Gill Gorell Barnes

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Family life in Britain is changing daily to include more stepfamilies, which have widely differing structures with varying histories, losses, transitions and economic circumstances. Of the one in five children who currently experience separation before they are 16, over half will live in a stepfamily at some point in their lives. Of the 150 000 couples with children who divorced each year at the end of the 1980s, a further 35 000 had a subsequent divorce. For some children we need to think of step-parenting within wider processes of transition, which include relationship changes of many kinds. The National Stepfamily Association have calculated that if current trends of divorce, cohabitation, remarriage and birth continue, there will be around 2.5 million children and young adults growing up in a stepfamily by the year 2000. The true pattern of re-ordering of partnership and family life is hard to chart, since many couples second or third time around prefer to cohabit rather than to marry.

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## What is a stepfamily?

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I shall argue that stepfamilies should be considered in the context of previous lives and relationships, rather than identified as a 'unique' family form, as a 'new' or 'second' family. A stepfamily is created when two adults form a household in which one or both brings a child from a previous relationship, and the new partner becomes an important adult and parent figure to their partner's child. Stepchildren may be full-time or part-time members of the new household, and in the 1990s as children move between the two households created by each partner, they are likely to be required to accommodate more than one family style. Since step-parents are additional rather than replacement parents, the shared division of one

same-gender parenting role between two people (mother and stepmother, father and stepfather) that arises from divorce, is one of the particular adaptations a modern stepfamily and the children of the family have to manage. Children can have three or four, and in families that have re-ordered more than once, up to six 'parent figures'. Unlike extended kinship structures in cultures where these have developed to facilitate the rearing of children, these post-divorce kinship structures may not be working in harmony, may well be adversarial and be in competition for a child's attachment.

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## Questions for the clinician

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When meeting with a person, whether child or adult, who lives as part of a stepfamily, a psychiatrist will find it useful to consider the wide context of relationships of which the person and family are likely to be a part. A recent study (Gorell Barnes *et al*, 1997) has shown different ways in which negative relationships that preceded the formation of the stepfamily, as well as stressful transitions accompanying marital dissolution, are likely to have long-lasting effects within the life of a stepfamily itself.

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## The original family on either side

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The psychiatrist should try to ascertain the quality of the original parental marriage from which the children now living in the stepfamily first came. Was it marked by quarrelling, acrimony or violence between the child's parent and partner? What, in the parent and/or child's opinion was the effect of the separation and divorce? The quality of the relationship between the child and their residential care-taking parent is important. Is it characterised

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**Box 1. Key points for enquiry***The original families on either side*

Quality of original parental marriage  
 Quality of relationships between child and residential parent  
 Explanations offered to the child  
 Quality of relationship after the divorce  
 Conflicting loyalties

*Extended family**Current marital relationship**Stepfamily relationships*

Child and step-parent  
 Child and full siblings, half- and step-siblings

*Economic and housing*

Current circumstances  
 Changes in housing, schooling  
 Friendship networks

by closeness of attachment, open talking and a recognition of the child's needs?

The psychiatrist should address whether the residential parent has offered clear explanations of the changes the family has gone through and whether the child has been given a chance to process the information.

The clinician should find out the quality of the relationship between the original parents after the divorce. Is it marked by hostility or violence? It is significant to know to what degree this former relationship impinges on the stepfamily boundaries in unhelpful ways.

Is the child caught in loyalty conflicts in relation to the two original parents? Contact visits should be handled reliably and appropriately by the non-residential parent but this may not be the case. Sometimes the contacts are used as an opportunity to continue with disputes. If this is the case, what is the effect of this on the child/stepfamily as a whole?

***The extended family***

The relationship between the stepfamily and the extended family of either adult should be noted by the psychiatrist. The step-parent may feel supported or alternatively criticised. The step-parent can experience rivalry from the child's original grandparents or kin. It is necessary for the step-parent to recognise the importance of the wider family to the child.

***The marital relationship***

What is the quality of the second marital relationship? The psychiatrist should find out whether the parents manage to work together as a team in spite of different loyalties to the children. How do they manage affection, communication, discipline?

***Stepfamily relationships***

The child may or may not be compatible with the step-parent. The nature of the relationship between the full siblings, the step-siblings and the half-siblings (if any) should be explored. How many changes in housing and schooling have the family been through? Examine the continuity of school, peer groups and close friendships.

What are the economic and housing conditions in which the stepfamily live? What degree of overcrowding do they experience? Do children from different sides of the family have to share one room? Have any of the children ever had to be 'looked after' by the state? If so, did they return to the same family constellation they left? What does the family think is the effect of these conditions on their relationships and ability to manage?

***Tensions between 'parental responsibility' and stepfamily life***

The focus on shared parental responsibility embodied in the Children Act 1989 infringes on newly forming family boundaries in many ways but makes clearly visible the social belief that a parent is for life. The Newcastle Study (Walker, 1992) has shown that many women wish contact with their former spouse to cease, in the context of previous and ongoing acrimony and violence. Where a parent wishes to continue their involvement with their child following a conflictual first marriage which has ended acrimoniously or violently, adversarial patterns of interaction between the former partners do not cease with divorce. If a former partner is actively disrupting current stepfamily life, for example telephoning every evening and insisting on talking to their child during a family meal, or behaving erratically in relation to contact, they create disappointment in the child and confuse arrangements for the family as a whole. The negotiations of daily living involve an active external third adult who is often not well

disposed to the new family arrangements and contributes to the ongoing lack of equilibrium in stepfamily life (Gorell Barnes, 1991). The pain and rage experienced by many men and women as they see their children in the daily care of other adults is a force currently receiving insufficient recognition.

Following the death of a parent, the incoming step-parent does not have the 'living' role of father or mother to compete with, but the legacy they inherit and the roles they move into will already have certain pre-programmed expectations in the child's mind, with inherent loyalty conflicts. What a 'father' or 'mother' should be may have been laid down in the child's mind long before their arrival, and negotiation with these patterns of expectation will be a continuous part of the family reorganisation.

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## Stepfamilies and conflict

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Current knowledge and research suggests that the pressures of stepfamily life for both parents and children may be greater than in nuclear, or even lone-parent families (Kiernan, 1992; Cockett & Tripp, 1994). For children who experience a series of disruptions and changes the social and educational problems may be greater. There is much evidence that the presence, extent and level of conflict in a family is a key factor in how well children adjust. Conflict in itself creates stress for children, whether the family is intact or separated (Lund, 1987; Jenkins *et al*, 1988; Gorell Barnes *et al*, 1997). However, the factors of loss of an intimate relationship with one parent and the introduction of a new adult into family life as a factor that may be stressful for children, has received relatively little attention in stepfamily literature, until the publication of recent analysis of the 1958 cohort (Kiernan, 1992) and the publication of the Exeter Study (Cockett & Tripp, 1994), which looks in detail at current transitions in family life. Hetherington, probably the most influential researcher in the stepfamily field, emphasises the diversity in children's responses and ability to cope (Hetherington, 1989*a,b*; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995).

Our research study (Gorell Barnes *et al*, 1997) of children who had grown up in stepfamilies, found that the accounts of many adult respondents echoed what emerges as a key finding from the Exeter Study (Cockett & Tripp, 1994), that adult relationships disrupted by divorce do cause grief to children over time, through the economic changes, the transitions and losses involved and in

the re-ordering of intimate relationships within the family pattern of daily life. While a good step-parent can bring strength to a family that has been through disruption, including emotional stability and the possibility of keeping the family above the level of the 'poverty' trap through a second income, many children had been emotionally content living in lone-parent families, where they experienced a strong bond to their care-giving parent.

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## The Children Act 1989

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Step-parents are, by implication, relegated to a less central role in relation to post-divorce child-rearing than either of the child's biological parents; but the models of family life many step-parents practise do not incorporate this recognition, nor do their growing connections to the child over time make this law work in practice (see 'Step-parent adoption', below). The intention of the Act did not take this complexity into account. It may lead to a non-resident parent behaving in ways that complicate the daily smooth running of life for a child by insisting on involvement at very small detailed levels of daily life. The Act is notionally liberating for parents, freeing them to a greater degree to come to their own arrangements without the interference of the courts. However, many new and complex points of potential authority are introduced into the ongoing network of responsibility for the children's lives. Greater powers are given to members of the extended family to apply for orders in respect of children, and step-parents are introduced as at an equal level with a number of others, who may be either family allies to the children, or contestants in hidden ways.

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### *Legal position of step-parents under the Children Act*

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At a London conference in 1994, De'Ath pointed out that:

"legislation can only do very limited things and it usually can't give what stepfamilies want, which is some idea of cohesion, some idea of dealing with transition, looking at change, adjustments, trying to sort out boundaries."

A step-parent can achieve assurance of continuity by applying for a residence order or by adopting a stepchild. A residence order effectively gives parental responsibility to one who does not have it. Married step-parents may apply without leave by virtue of the stepchild being a "child of the

family", as may unmarried step-parents who have cared for the child for three years (section 10, 5). There is no consideration for an unmarried step-parent. Without a residence order a step-parent is in the same position as any other person who may be caring for a child without having parental responsibility, thus in effect being placed in the same position as a 'nanny' who has authority delegated by the parent (Masson, 1992).

### *Step-parent adoption*

The majority of step-parent adoptions in the past involved a birth-mother and a stepfather. The number of step-parent adoptions decreased from over 9000 in 1975 to 4000 in 1984. Figures collected for 1992 indicate that 4881 step-parent applications were made, with 3612 actual orders being granted. Current adoption changes the status of both biological parents. The adoption order severs all the child's legal relationships with the birth family, and the parent with whom the child is living becomes an adoptive parent jointly with the step-parent. This dramatic denial of birth parentage is likely to have many hidden effects that are currently not openly discussed.

### *Children 'being looked after' by the state*

Recent analysis of children in care who are also part of stepfamilies (Fitzgerald, 1992; Schlosser & De'Ath, 1994) has shown a side of stepfamily life which all those in the child social service and mental health care fields need to be alert to and informed about. The analysis highlights a number of factors pointing to the vulnerable end of stepfamily life. Key features affecting children include many of those already referred to – rented accommodation, poor neighbourhoods, overcrowding, receipt of benefit, having a young mother and in addition being of mixed-race parentage. Parents' own deprivation or ill health, as well as a history of abuse and neglect, are associated with the risk of entering care.

### *Fathers, the Child Support Act and the 'right' to the child*

What happens to fathering in the immediate aftermath of divorce? Furstenberg & Nord (1985) analysed a nationally representative sample of US children aged 11–16 in 1981, and looked at the amount of contact children maintained with the

non-residential parent, finding this to be uniformly low across the entire sample. Only 17% of children saw their non-custodial parent once a week. Smaller-scale studies in the UK (e.g. Walker *et al*, 1992) indicate that frequency of visiting is related both to father's employment and to the gender of their children, with girls being less likely to maintain contact with non-residential fathers. Approximately 38% of all fathers are estimated to lose contact with their children in the second year after divorce (Simpson *et al*, 1995). The ongoing controversy about the value for the child of maintaining contact with a parent who has left, within the context of an acrimonious relationship between divorced parents, is a key feature of many studies of post-divorce living (Emery & Forehand, 1994). Whether a divorce increases or decreases parental disputes is important, because it is conflict itself which emerges from many studies from different sources as one of the key factors in the well-being of children (Emery, 1982; Lund, 1987; Emery & Forehand, 1994). Children provide one of the ties that give angry former spouses the opportunity to continue unresolved fighting (Emery & Forehand, 1994). The effects of this on stepfamilies are important for clinicians to take into account, as are the economic effects of the Child Support Act 1991. Competition for scarce resources that stepfamilies may have to experience, includes pushing stepfamilies created by divorce into dependence on ex-husbands for subsistence where their new partner is supporting children by a previous marriage. There are currently no reductions in the obligations for payment to a first family where a man is looking after stepchildren, unless their father is dead or untraceable. This can create a snowballing of financial obligations, and highlights the structural as well as the emotional necessity of considering stepfamily dynamics in relation to the larger context of former marriages.

## **Mediation and conflict**

While there is a heavy emphasis placed on the availability of mediation and counselling services in current divorce legislation, this is as yet unequal to the size of the task, and in reality may not adequately provide the means to reach the goal for the group of families who are most adversarial (the goal being to reach agreement on the provision for and contact with children following divorce). The possible extension of advice, counselling and other services to children and families in need and to related provision outlined in the Children Act (in

which local authorities are placed under a duty to comply with requests for help relating to advice guidance and counselling, section 27) has not been matched by a significant shift in resources. It is likely that post-divorce disputes and their effect on stepfamily life will continue to come the way of child psychiatrists, particularly in relation to families who cannot afford mediation services.

Studies carried out on family life in the post-divorce period, as well as our own study (Guidobaldi *et al*, 1986; Walker, 1992; Cockett & Tripp, 1994) highlight the importance of reduction of conflict in the post-divorce years. Elliot & Richards (1992) found that many years before divorce parents had often been in disagreement (specifically over child-rearing). One of the implications of this is that such long-standing differences between natural parents are unlikely to disappear or be much changed by mediation or counselling.

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## Stepfamily diversity

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The relationship between the development of parenting skills in fathers post-divorce, at the same time as their ex-wives are trying to rebuild new lives without them which may include new partners, indicates the variety of experiences a child entering a stepfamily may be exposed to at any one time (Brand *et al*, 1988). In addition to the shifts in the patterns of parenting, children may change home, school and neighbourhood; either following a marriage break-up or after a parent's re-partnering. Walker (1992) charted the housing careers of post-divorce families. These may involve frequent moves, unsatisfactory accommodation, and increased dependence on public-sector housing with, at worst, homelessness. Stepfamilies on average have more dependant children per household, are more likely to live in local authority and terraced housing, often in overcrowded circumstances, and have a lower average income. Economic circumstances may be severely depleted. Bradshaw & Millar (1991) estimate that as many as 85% of lone-parent families are dependant on state income support. It is in this context of depleted economic circumstances and increased welfare support that many stepfamily relationships begin.

During the course of such transitions parents are likely, where they have the opportunity, to form closer links with extended family members from an older generation, such as grandparents or aunts who they might otherwise have seen only intermittently. Findings on whether this happens seem to differ, both in the UK and in the USA, but one

common finding is that children are more likely to lose touch with the grandparents of their non-residential parent and to maintain contact with the grandparents of the care-taking parent. The Exeter study (Cockett & Tripp, 1994) suggests that the more often families re-order, the more frequently children lose contact with sets of grandparents, so that the 'core' family has less support from the extended family. This was in contrast to our own study of children drawn from the 1958 cohort (Gorell Barnes *et al*, 1997) which showed a high degree of grandparental involvement while the children were still growing up and an ongoing degree of extended family involvement in spite of increasing mobility throughout the UK. As our sample was taken from all over the UK, it was possible to note regional variations in the closeness of kinship networks (in spite of the very small sample size). The Children Act 1989 emphasises that wider family links matter, and it may be of great importance for clinicians to remember the roles extended family members can play in the development of children.

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## Cohort studies

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In this country two major cohorts of children growing up, one begun in 1946 and the other in 1958, have shown distinct patterns of individual disruption following divorce. The first (Wadsworth *et al*, 1990) has drawn attention to changes in economic circumstances, to changes in schooling, and to lower attainment and subsequent relationship problems which suggest that children of divorced parents are more likely themselves to get divorced. Ferri (1984) has in addition shown how adverse trends continue into stepfamily life. These studies did not focus on new ways in which families see themselves developing resources and new solutions to the crises that may be seen as a 'normal' part of going through dissolution and change. Their focus is to help us predict risk factors for children which may lead them to a less secure sense of who they are, and who they could become. Processes which follow divorce have been shown to include confusion, self-blame, poor verbal expression of feeling, embarrassment, shame, loneliness and a sense of rejection, which can lead to difficulty in meeting emotional challenges. There are likely to be many ways in which links between childhood and adult problems can be established. In relation to children whose parents have divorced, a combination of family and social factors interacts with poor self-esteem. Changes such as a move to

worse housing conditions, or through negative attitudes of others (Wadsworth *et al.*, 1990) may affect school work so that attainment and behaviour may be at risk.

The second cohort of children, born in 1958, has recently been analysed along a number of dimensions, which again tell us more about potential stresses for children than about potential resilience derived from moderating factors in the child's family world. These studies suggest that divorce, on a much greater scale and to a more marked degree than death, has consequences some of which persist into adulthood (Cherlin *et al.*, 1991). Kiernan (1992), in her analysis of the young people at 17, noted tendencies to leave school early and with fewer qualifications, a lower chance of tertiary education, a higher tendency to leave home early and to form sexual relationships at a young age. Her concern in relation to these findings arose from the potential correlation between young marriage and cohabitation and subsequent separation and divorce at an early age. I confirmed the findings (in interviews drawn from the same sample) about school, higher education and leaving home early; but found a number of things which led me to consider how stepfamily living may change perceptions about family life in wider ways, many of which were extremely positive. This was of particular relevance where a pattern of violence or negativity in a first marriage had been replaced by a more stable relationship in a second marriage.

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## Understanding the stepfamily

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What advantages can a family approach bring to clinical work with a stepfamily? It offers a conceptual framework for understanding and mapping complex sets of relationships in terms of their patterns, shifts, and changes in structures and beliefs.

Drawing up a geneogram or 'whole family map' looking at the family over more than one generation can create the opportunity for looking at the entrances and exits from the family; for exploring who is close to whom and who is distant from whom and for noticing patterns of relationship that have repeated at different times in the stepfamily's former and present family lives. Simply discussing the processes and pathways by which the current family came together can offer the opportunity for a more coherent story to emerge in which the current difficulties are seen to have some meaningful antecedents or current relational connections.

It is perhaps most important for the clinician to remember that a stepfamily is not to be confused

with a 'first time round' family or judged by the same criteria. The stepfamily structure allows for a diversity normally unrealisable within an intact, biologically constructed family (although assisted fertilisation is leading to some dynamic new structures). Stepfamilies may span generations in ways that challenge conventional generation boundaries. Within a stepfamily, stepbrothers or sisters may be 15 years or more apart, while stepchildren and step-parents may have a much smaller age gap between them. This is likely to create multi-faceted beliefs about living arrangements as well as challenging beliefs about family life and scrutinising wider society.

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## Implications for clinical work

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Stepfamily experience needs to be understood in three contexts of loss and change that are likely to effect the family in the room. The first is the process of all the previous relationship losses, as well as transitions of context (home, school, neighbourhood and peer group friends) and the associated hazards of amplified loss to the adult's well-being and the children's emotional development. The second is the ongoing relationships between the children and their non-residential parent(s). The third is the extended family network and its patterns of relationship with the family in the room over time, including losses of relationship with grandparents of the non-residential parent.

Communication in stepfamilies, and the way transitions have been discussed and explained, is of key importance to the well-being of children. Mismanagement in families can range from ongoing acrimonious rowing between all adult parties to evasion, silence and lies. Children need to process information by repeating conversations over time, not through a single 'telling'.

The wider extended family may have been of crucial importance in supporting children and lone parents during transitional periods, and may therefore remain a presence for good or discomfort in the lives of current family formation. Such kinship networks may hold more importance for children than adults give credit for. It is important to bear this wider network in mind in working with the child or family.

Persistent unresolved quarrelling, violence or abuse carry powerful legacies for children, and may require longer work to help them untangle the effects on their own self-esteem and ideas about family management.

Patterns of negative relationship in childhood experience do not necessarily go away when

children grow up. The same patterns may well continue into adult life and be part of adult experience. The effect of these patterns in all families who have experienced adversarial divorce may be an important component of disturbance in an individual presenting for psychiatric help, whether in the context of the divorce process, stepfamily life or other forms of psychological distress.

Stepfamilies created by death are less common in our society, but may require the clinician to pay attention to the way memories of the dead parent are allowed as part of the child's experience. The attempt to deny a dead parent is likely to contribute to confusion in children and to negativity in current family relations.

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