
Commentary

Ruth Sims

"A parent is for life". Not just a social belief as Mrs Gorell Barnes states, but a passionately held belief of most children. The pain and rage of many men and women as they see their children in the daily care of other adults is equalled, if not surpassed, by the pain and rage of children who see a parent take on the care of another partner's children.

In the families who are referred to our child psychiatry team, the pain and rage may be carried by one of the children, who acts it out in self-neglect, self-harm and open or silent hostility to a step-parent, while her mother may be struggling to overcome grief, depression and loss of self-esteem. The fact that the father has moved in with the mother's best friend, his daughter's godmother, has added to the pain, loss and sense of double betrayal. Cumulative losses are common in such families. Add to this violence in the second marriage and further breakdown, and the cumulative effect of major life events builds up stress upon stress. Mrs Gorell Barnes has highlighted many transitions and adjustments that stepfamily members have to make and the need to bear in mind the wider family connections with both positive and negative associations.

In family therapy, 'telling the story' is always an important part of the healing process. Every family member needs to be listened to and to know that their perspective has been understood and their feelings acknowledged. My experience has been that before effective family work can take place, parenting couples may need time and space to express the pain and rage they feel, both separately and together, and the child or children may need time and space on their own, with a therapist, to untangle the confusion of their feelings without the risk of further alienating a parent or step-parent or being accused of disloyalty. A highly intelligent 17-year-old girl succumbed to depression 18 months after her father left home to join another partner. She could not feel at home in her father's new surroundings and was baffled by the different standards expected by his partner. "With her, I just don't know how to be, whatever I do seems to be wrong". Her mother had moved into a smaller house with a new partner, but the girl (months later) had not even unpacked or hung up her pictures; she still

felt "there is no place for me". Like so many others, she took refuge in flight into an early sexual relationship.

In cases of extreme acting-out, where a child may be shuttling between two households, often the conflict between the parents continues through the child. What is the role for the clinician in such cases? We do not find it helpful to families to allow the conflict to be brought into the consulting room, but by working with both households separately we are sometimes able to help the natural parents and step-parents to understand what stresses are contributing to the present situation.

Mrs Gorell Barnes has given us a useful summary of some of the important studies of step-families, and of these the long-term longitudinal studies are among the most interesting. It is heartening that she has found some positive outcomes for those who have experienced step-families; in child psychiatry, we tend to see only the most traumatic cases and so lose sight of the positive aspect. I would support the implications for professional work. In my experience, the need to understand all previous transitions and the involvement of the extended family network is of crucial importance, especially in mixed-race families. A child who spends part of their time with their Afro-Caribbean mother and her family, and the rest of their life with their English father and step-mother has to adapt to both cultures. The child is torn apart if both mother and step-mother profess to love her dearly, but hate each other and what the other does to her child. One insists she wears bows in her hair, the other tears them out. They fight over who goes to parents' evenings. Only through learning to see the good in both mothers and through all parties accepting each other can the child be encouraged to develop in peace. Much time may need to be given to helping parents understand their own experiences to free them to work creatively with their stepchildren. This is an increasing part of my work and likely to become more so. I have come to have great respect for those children who do adjust to these difficult life events and who can accept new step-parents and remain loyal and affectionate to their separated parents.

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