

Parent-Child Relationships in Stepfamilies

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The parent-child relationship missing from early conceptualisations of the "tasks" of stepfamily development

Early clinical writers - The couple's relationship "key"

Mills (1984):

- The couple needs to be "the architect of the stepfamily system, to assume conscious executive control of the family".
- Draw a boundary around "the parental unit to cut across the pre-existing biological parent-child bonds"
- Development of stepparent-child relationship
- Maintenance of parent-child relationship NOT named as a developmental task

The "parent-child relationship" in stepfamily research

Crosbie-Burnett (1984)

Findings challenged clinical emphasis on the couple's relationship
Intensified research focus on stepparent-child relationship



If we assume a bond between parent and child and some type of positive attraction between the adult partners, then the relationships in the stepfamily that lack raison d'être are those between stepparent and stepchild. ... These results suggest that proactive attention should be given to the stepparentship if all members of the household are to be happy in the new family.

A lack of *primary* focus on parent-child relationships



In empirical stepfamily research



In some clinical conceptualisations of stepfamily relationships

Can we afford to “assume a bond between parent and child”?

- Evidence that parent-child relationships come under considerable stress following remarriage
- Children experience a loss of time, attention, focus as the new adult relationship develops
- Parents and children struggle with loyalty issues, including around discipline issues
- Children can perceive a loss of parental commitment and experience an “outsider” position

Parents and Children in Stepfamilies - How do these relationships fare following remarriage?

- Hetherington and Clingempeel's study (1992)
 - Parenting by mothers was disrupted in first two years
 - Mothers showed increased rates of negativity and decreased positivity
 - Children showed adjustment difficulties (internalising and externalising behaviours)
 - Children were more negative towards mothers and stepfathers
- Parenting by mothers recovered after two years

Parents and Children in Stepfamilies - How do these relationships fare following remarriage?

- Greater difficulties are experienced again during adolescence compared to non-divorced families (Bray, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002)
- Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage
 - Children experience two sustained periods of disrupted parenting
 - Authoritative parenting occurs less often in stepfamilies

Parents and Children in Stepfamilies

- Children in stepfamilies rate family climates as less warm and more conflicted (Kurdek & Fine, 1993).
- Adolescents/young adults from stepfamilies leave home earlier – USA, Britain, Australia and New Zealand

Five qualitative research projects

- Interviews with 9 clinicians experienced in working with repartnered families
- Group interviews with 28 young adults who grew up in repartnered families (7 male, 21 female)
- A multiple case study of 7 mothers and pre- to early adolescent children currently living in repartnered households
- A questionnaire study using a stepfamily vignette completed by 65 late adolescent/young adult participants
- Life stories with 40 young adults, 18 of whom lived in stepfamilies as children (Ongoing analysis)

Children's perspectives are influential

Children influence the likelihood of the stepfamily survival

Children's perspectives very important



What can be done to promote children's acceptance of stepfamily living?

Or stem the rebellion against the new family situation?

Parental commitment?

- Clinicians often talk about the "losses" children sustain through family transitions
- Oft-repeated theme across qualitative studies – A potential loss of attention, time, focus
 - Children's perceptions of a loss of importance
 - A loss or fear of loss of relationship with the parent

Loss of time and attention or relationship

But because your parent and stepparent are still getting to know each other you don't become nearly as, well in your own eyes, as important. I definitely felt a bit isolated especially going from a household with one parent to two. There's a lot less attention from anyone really.

(Female, Young adult study)

Why are we not enough?

And you know how dare he come and steal our, what we had, because we became really close, us three girls and Simon and Mum, became really close and you know how dare Mum think that she needs someone else.

(Young woman from Life Stories Study)

How could he love her more?

I once went through a stage where my Dad, I was like, oh my gosh, how could you love anyone more than your children ... and I couldn't understand how my Dad could love my step-mum more than us. It was just like but what if she leaves you and we are the ones that you know stay here. And so um yeah I felt jealous that my Dad loved her more than us and I think that made me feel insecure possibly ...and then maybe that came out with other stuff like school work.

(Young woman from Life Stories Study)

The vignette study and what do children want..

A questionnaire study that included a neutral stepfather stepfamily vignette of a recently remarried stepfather couple and the mother's two children, boy aged 13 years and girl aged 11 years

65 late adolescence/early adulthood participants (Mean age, 20.3 years)

From range of family backgrounds

Asked to focus on how children would respond

(Moore & Cartwright, 2005)

What do you think the children may want from mother now that she has remarried?

Emphasis on the warmth dimensions of parenting:

- Love, reassurance and/or support
- Being the same as before
- Giving time and attention



What children want

To feel not rejected or that their time/bond or relationship with their mother is jeopardised following her relationship with Thomas. ... First and foremost to be loved and respected by their mother as they always were.

More time and children are used to having mother all to themselves before marriage. So after marriage they may feel a bit unwelcome, isolated or unwanted, as Mum would also be preoccupied with the stepfather.

Assumptions underlying the responses and rationales

- That children may feel threatened by the changes and the mother's relationship with SF
- That children will need mother to counteract this sense of threat through her actions:
 - By giving them time and attention
 - By showing them love
 - By reassuring them
 - By not changing how s/he is with them
- Demonstrating ongoing commitment to the children

Warmth and support dimensions of parenting

- Across studies, therapists, young adults and children all talked about the importance of parents maintaining these aspects of parenting
- The therapists saw the loss of attention as almost inevitable
- Children don't want parents to change although they themselves change, often rebelling against the entrance of the stepparent

Discipline and loyalty issues

Interview Studies: Children and young adults recalled being upset, angry or feeling betrayed when:

- Parents allowed or encouraged a stepparent to discipline them when it was unwanted
- Parent consistently supported the stepparent during conflict
- Parent did not protect from abuse or perceived abuse

The stepparent role and loyalty issues

One of the worst things is thinking that your stepparent is somehow kind of turning your own parent against you. It's just the whole betrayal thing again. It's just, it feels wrong. ... At times, I felt that because I wasn't being stuck up for, I'd even start to side with my stepbrothers against him (father). (Male)

Discipline and control dimensions of parenting

Researchers and clinicians have emphasised the importance of discipline issues in stepfamilies

Who should discipline the children?

- 51 participants thought the mother ought to have primary responsibility (3 also mentioned non-residential father)
- 14 participants (20 %) thought mother and stepfather ought to have equal responsibility for discipline
- 8 of the above were of Asian descent (8 out 18 Asian)

(Vignette Study)

Discipline and control dimensions of parenting

(Disciplining) is her (mother's) role in the family, which should not change, or the children may be affected by the upheaval of family structure.

Anne. They are her children. Thomas may be married to Anne but that gives him no right to discipline the children.
(Vignette Study)

Yeah I think basically I agree with you completely. I think your parents, you expect they have a right to tell you what to do. .. Basically your stepparents are just - they're there. And if they do, it's sort of unnatural and it becomes an intrusion.
(Male, Young adult study)

Exceptions

- Children and young adults who described stepfathers as "cool", "laidback"; and reported that stepfathers left discipline to the mothers
- Two young adult women who expressed a preference for having been disciplined by stepfather who was seen as more reasonable or balanced

The stepparent role as "friend"

I think one of the strengths of my relationship with my stepfather is that fact that he hasn't tried to play that parent role cause as far as I can see I'm actually a split of my parents .. so my stepfather's just kind of stuck in the middle and he's basically just like a friend .. I mean I've never thought of him as my father and I don't think he's ever tried to be like a father figure. (Male)

Parent maintaining the role of discipline

Parent accepting responsibility for discipline/control issues
Stepparent not attempting to take over this role

↓

S/he is taking responsibility for me.
S/he is committed as the parent.
S/he (the stepparent) respects my relationship with my parent

A thorny question: The issue of priority

Should the mother give priority to any one in the family (out of her husband and her children) and if so who?

- 2 participants (Asian) stated that the mother ought to give priority to her partner
- 31 participants said that the mother ought to give priority to the children
- 32 participants thought that neither should be given priority over the other, or that they should receive equal priority

Priority?

Children first. They should always be her first priority because they are only children and need more help and support and she has made the choice to marry, not them, so she must make it easier for the kids.

No, the mother should treat everybody equally. The children are going through a difficult stage in their life, adolescence, and need their mother's love and support. Thomas also needs her love and support as he may be seen as somewhat of an intruder in the family.

Potentially problematic clinical position

Clinicians must often focus their efforts on helping a newly married couple assist young children in the family. In-laws and older children obviously also have an impact of the development of a remarriage. It is important that boundaries be developed quickly. ... One cornerstone is that couples must repeatedly emphasize to those around them the importance and primacy of the marital relationship. Through this action, couples make the statement that if others try to put them in the position of choosing between family members and their spouses, they will align with their spouses (Martin & Martin, 1992, p. 137).

Conclusions

- Parent-child relationships can lose focus within the newly formed stepfamily
- Therapists and researchers can contribute to a lack of focus
 - By not naming the parent-child relationship as a key relationship (along with the couple, stepparent-child)
 - By lack of primary research focus
- However, children in stepfamilies are influential and we need to understand their perspectives

Conclusions

- Some of the negative responses of children can be related to a loss of emotional security in relationships with parents
 - Am I still as important?
 - Who does s/he love more?
- These responses are exacerbated if they perceive that the parent is giving loyalty/priority to the partner as evidenced by:
 - Loss of attention, time or focus
 - Issues around discipline

Conclusions

- It is important that the parent-child relationship is conceptualised as a key relationship (along with the couple's and stepparent-child relationship) within the stepfamily system