

## ***Hell....p! I'm a Stepmother***

Author Sonja Ridden, herself a step parent, experienced therapist and counsellor, begins by telling us a little of her own personal experience of being a stepmother. It is always interesting to hear another's views on a subject close in importance to one's own, and yet highlights that each of us as individuals, and each step-family's situation is unique to itself though there may be similar points of reference.

Ridden defines these stages of 'development' in step-family formation as originally identified by Newman, M (1994) which list as the following;

1. fantasy stage
2. transition stage
3. conflict stage
4. action stage and finally
5. resolution stage

Ridden explores the complexities of individual step-parenting situations, using clear examples from the point at which each of us enters into the new step-family relationship. She emphasises the uniqueness of this for each member of the new family unit. We each come with our own histories. The way we inter-relate with each other depends on many factors that we bring with us; our own personalities, age gender, experience and genetic make-up, the timing in each member's emotional and physical lives when this new family formation takes place is also extremely important.

Ridden points out that children in these step-families have often not had the opportunity to deal with their own parent's separation/divorce before being thrown into new relationships of which they may have little choice but be a part of. We are encouraged to know ourselves and our own 'baggage' well before embarking on joining a step-family. Unfortunately, as Ridden herself experienced, many of us are already well on that road to stepfamily living before we realise just how many individuals we are now expected to have relationships with apart from our chosen partners.

Ridden acknowledges that while we may choose our new partners we don't necessarily choose their children, or their children us. Nor the children their new step-siblings. We cannot therefore expect the love we share with our partners to automatically overflow to include each other's children.

The point I think clearly made here, is that stepfamilies are thrown into the 'deep end' of the realities of family life and relationships (often with virtual strangers) immediately – there is rarely the opportunity for any 'honeymoon' or fantasy stage. We are advised that we will cope better if we recognise this from the outset and work out with our partners (and individual family members) how to deal with any difficulties (ie differences in values, beliefs and expectations and roles between different families can vary enormously eg how you and your partner expect your children to behave at the meal table)

Ridden though strongly condemns any kind of abuse within the new stepfamily unit and recommends professional help be sought.

During the transition into a stepfamily we are going to feel stressed as with any major life changes and Ridden points out that this is normal and it helps to be prepared and expect this distress which can present as 'loneliness', 'shame', 'difficulties forming relationships',

'disillusionment', 'jealousy' 'helplessness', 'uncertainty', 'lack of control', 'rage', 'commitment', (or should it be over-commitment!)

As a relatively new stepfamily member, it is hard not to make the comment that written advice is always more difficult to put into practice without the luxury of having the wisdom of hindsight.

Perhaps the most helpful comment Ridden makes, apart from recognition that such feelings are normal during this early stage is that any changes should be kept to a minimum and occur gradually (eg changing children's rooms, schools etc) Unrealistic expectations (often unspoken) can be, Ridden says, extremely disruptive if not talked about, understood and redefined within the context of the reality of the new stepfamily. She recommends particularly with regard to children, that those step-parents who have little or no parenting experience to read up on any relevant material (eg realistic expectations and appropriate behaviour of various ages/ stages of child development)

Ridden explores different expectations couples have as full-time, working, and weekend sps and suggest alternative possibilities within the different situations. She underlines the importance of open communication in all circumstances to enable clear understanding of where our partners are at and of their feelings about different situations of which we may otherwise be unaware..... 'Workable solutions' she says, require partners to talk.

Ridden encourages us to an understanding not only of where our partners are at, but of our children's and stepchildren's viewpoints. Their emotional, physical intellectual and spiritual feelings and needs will be more adequately met she says if we 'step into their shoes' This helps them to feel not only 'safe' in a new environment but that they belong and are loved and valued for who they are. Not, she acknowledges, an easy task but one that is extremely valuable for the health and well-being of the new stepfamily.

Don't even try to compare the experience of 'mothering' with 'stepmothering' Ridden advises, similarly as you only set yourself up for failure and unhappiness. She recommends that while keeping up with old friendships and relevant support is important, networks, especially with those that have stepfamily experience can be very helpful. It is important for both partners to learn how to deal with the many distressing feelings experienced as individuals and as a couple and for each to know how to find (acceptable and appropriate) forms of expression for these very natural feelings.

Appropriate professional help was recommended for distressing feelings that an individual felt unable to deal with themselves and partners or through a support network

Ridden pays special attention to the role dads play, within stepfamilies and prior to divorce. The legal system as she notes still heavily favours custodial rights of mothers over fathers, placing fathers who wish to be actively involved in parenting in sometimes impossible situations over which they have little control. The fact that Ridden acknowledges so strongly the complexities of men's experiences post-divorce is not only a much needed voice supporting men in their role as parents but an encouragement to women particularly to be more sensitive and aware of the needs and feelings of the men in our lives in this regard. (of both our ex.'s and our current partners) Ridden advises for men to give themselves enough time before embarking on a new relationship.

Ridden emphasises the importance of the couple relationship – spending time and energy developing emotional intimacy and communication (as well as physical) and taking time

away from children and family life on a regular basis. (I cannot help but support her suggestions in this area!) Don't be afraid of conflict which dealt with carefully can be part of a healthy committed couple relationship but ensure support of each other in front of the children.

Ridden goes into greater detail about how best to form healthy relationships with stepchildren understanding that instant love is not to be expected. Disciplining stepchildren should as much as possible be left to the child's own parent. Your own and your stepchildren both need your time and attention but it is important Ridden says that special time is made for your own children so that they are able to tell you how they are feeling, and for you to tell them they are loved and have a unique place in your life. It is important that although situations may not always be able to change, children feel they are understood and supported.

Ridden adds helpful advice about how to deal with difficulties in step-sibling relationships and more generalised family situations. She suggests family conferences as one possibility for finding solutions to suit everyone and how to deal with compromises.

Relating to former partners, to a partner's 'ex.' and even to grandparents (or in-laws) can, depending on circumstances be very rewarding or an extremely frustrating process. When the situation is such that unpleasantness is inevitable, Ridden says it is wise to keep children out of the conflict as much as is possible for all the adults involved are part of that child's life and he/she needs to be able to relate to each on their own terms without destructive adult interference. Unfortunately we can not always control such incidences and children in stepfamilies suffer because of it.

Ridden continues discussing the pros and cons of such issues as whether bringing a new baby into a stepfamily situation is a positive step and how a baby might impinge on individual family members.

Ridden introduces in her chapter on 'grief' just how much loss is part of stepfamily life. Loss of what might have been and what has gone, which she says is a grieving that we must learn to recognise, then to identify what it is we have lost by being part of this stepfamily and to give ourselves the time and space to express the grief.

Step-parenting a child with special needs or disability can be an overwhelming burden particularly for parents/step-parents who are part of a stepfamily as Ridden's personal experience of being a step-parent of a child with Attention Deficit Disorder. She covers the inevitable type of reactions possible from medical and other professionals but encourages us as parents and step-parents to seek out what we know will be best for our families and children (step or otherwise).

She goes on to discuss the difficulties of parenting 'the problem child' and makes suggestions as to how couples together can handle such issues. It must be remembered though as she points out, such 'problem children' are not unique to stepfamilies.

Happiness *is* possible and depends largely on one's ability to accept the reality of the situations and the choices we have made and can make. We need to protect ourselves as parents/step-parents by 'creating boundaries' so the difficulties and stresses don't overwhelm us – we need to look after ourselves too. Above all it's okay to ask for help and it does not make us failures as parents, whether from our support networks, stepfamily support programs, professionals with expertise in stepfamily complexities.

Other concerns Ridden deals with are money, access visits co-parenting, holidays, family traditions, Christmas, birthdays, family gatherings, the reappearance of an absent biological parent and how to forgive ourselves and others involved in our painful experiences of step-parenting.

Ridden takes us along a path which enables us, having made our choices, to accept responsibility for them and allows us the ability to find a sense of freedom and happiness in our roles as parents in our new step-parenting situations. She doesn't for a moment lead us to believe that the journey will be easy but given enough time and care it can be extremely rewarding.

I thoroughly recommend stepfamily couples to take the time to read this book. It would also make an excellent guide for a step-parents support group, lending itself to weekly topical discussion.

This review was written by Anne Penman for Stepfamily News, the newsletter of Stepfamily Association of Victoria Inc, and published in the Spring 2002 edition. Used by permission.

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