

Men in Stepfamilies – Work in Progress

With Fathers Day is around the corner, I found myself thinking about some of the issues men can find themselves wrestling with in stepfamilies. Men often energetically dive into their new stepfamilies with the best of intentions, and surface in bewilderment as their best efforts to ‘help’ meet with rebuffs, cold shoulders, wariness or rejection. What has gone wrong?

Roles or rolled? For both biological dads and stepdads, one common theme often emerges – the ‘male role’. All of us absorb expectations about how to be men or women as we grow up. For many men, these role expectations are as invisible as the atmosphere we breathe, but just as powerful. Take them away and we flounder.

For example, traditional role expectations in our society are still for women to be primary caregivers for children, and to take responsibility to nurture adult relationships, while men are providers and increasingly involved but ‘back-up’ parents. Take away that marriage / relationship, and many men find themselves in unfamiliar roles as the primary caregiver for their children as well as still in provider role. Add a new partner as 75% of men do (more quickly than women), and what happens?

Will the real parent please stand up It seems from many of the calls SAVI takes, that many dads and their new partners expect that the female partner will take over the role of primary caregiver, ‘releasing’ dad to his traditional provider and ‘back-up caregiver’ role. Conflict arises if the children miss the closeness to dad they built with him as a sole parent, or if dad’s new partner embraces her new role of nurturing and discipline in a way the children and dad object to. She can feel set up, undermined and isolated.

Natural nurturer On the other hand conflict may arise if she (quite rightly) rejects her partner’s invitation to fulfil the traditional role expectation of women to ‘naturally’ be caregiver to children she barely knows, when they have a parent (their father) there to care for them. From the man’s perspective, yes he’s dad, but this is a very different role to what he’s learnt to expect throughout his lifetime. It doesn’t feel natural for him either! So who will look after the kids?

Learning on the run Dad may feel very underqualified for the caregiver job, but it’s his while the kids are with him, unless he can negotiate a job-share arrangement with his partner. Did you say negotiate? Now that’s another skill that traditionally has been cultivated by caregivers. Men may feel they have to learn on the run.

While juggling the competing demands of work and childcare is no doubt difficult, at the very least, dad and his new partner need to ensure

- they acknowledge this is new territory for both, and requires conscious effort to carve out mutually acceptable roles, rather than assuming either will take up any particular role
- dad maintains some significant time with his children on his own, and
- they work together as a team, with dad clearly delegating his parental authority (‘when I’m not here, Judy is in charge’), publicly supporting his partner’s actions with the children, and discussing differences about parenting styles away from them.

Divided loyalties Also at work here is dad in another unaccustomed role – as the connection between his partner and his children. Research suggests that many dads experience a strong

sense of being caught or trapped 'in the middle'; having to negotiate decision making with their partners, mediate in conflict between their children and their partners, and help their partners find a role in the family. Dads may feel very alone with the responsibility of parenthood, and uncomfortable with the conflicting demands of this role.

Tim described this sense of divided loyalties as

An enormous feeling of being caught, being trapped, of everything having to be negotiated... You feel you are striding along comfortably, then you trip... I refer to them as 'trip-wires', things you just don't see and you trip over them and an explosion blows your leg off... It makes you hesitant about what you can and what you can't do.

A short movie This sense of aloneness can be heightened where men's experience of their own fathers is limited. Les described trying to remember being fathered himself as

'like trying to reconstruct a movie on the basis of half a dozen still frames'.

Many men (and women) report experiencing their fathers as distant, and often absent because of work. In contrast mothers are often experienced as closer and more influential role models for one's own parenting style.

Stepdads can run into similar minefields.

Dave decided early in his relationship with Julie that what her young kids needed was a firm hand, with some clear rules. Julie clearly had her hands full, and let them get away with too much. When they moved in together, he would 'sort them out' as there was no way he was going to live with kids running the show. Dave was astounded when not just the kids but Julie also objected to his full-on style.

This clicks with the traditional male self-reliant, technical 'fix-it' approach to problems. What can be useful instead is readiness to learn from the strengths of the traditional female role, starting with listening; and openness to building relationship, connectedness, respect and trust – in other words, earning the right to have influence on the life of another rather than assuming it by virtue of age, gender or status.

Time warp Where stepfathers have not been parents themselves, their sense of a parenting role often comes from their own upbringing. With no opportunity to update this model with children of their own, they can be caught in a time warp. This may find expression in frustration that their partner is 'too soft' on their children. While this is one side of the picture, it ignores the structural changes in parenting styles from one generation to the next.

Nurturing from a well of sadness Many men in stepfamilies combine roles as biological father whose children visit (87% of arrangements) with stepfather to their partner's 'live-in' children. These men face the special challenge of developing an ongoing role in the lives of their stepchildren against a backdrop of having more limited opportunities to provide similar nurture to their own children. There is no easy answer to the sense of ongoing loss this produces, but it is important to acknowledge and get support with these difficult feelings, and to make the most of the contact opportunities that are available.

Conclusion

Stepfamilies provide opportunity for men to review the roles they have adopted as partners, fathers and caregivers. The new family structure provides encouragement to experiment with

‘doing it differently’, and rewards personal growth and openness to change. What emerges will result from a combination of influences:

- the man’s willingness to look at changing roles from the traditional role of provider and ‘backup’ parent to the non-traditional role of primary caregiver; or at the other end
- his willingness/reluctance to share responsibility, to ‘let his partner in’
- his partner’s willingness to take on practical and/or emotional caregiving tasks
- the children’s willingness to accept caregiving from the stepparent.

What is important is not the roles adopted, but that they be discussed and negotiated openly rather than assumed or taken for granted. This can be an uncomfortable but ultimately rewarding ride.

Men also face the challenge of looking into themselves for a sense of identity and strength, rather than only relying on ‘external’, culturally prescribed definitions of their roles. For many men, this is a big ask, as it is an area traditionally defined as female territory, and their memory bank of experiencing a father/nurturer may be limited. Openness to exploring this new sense of identity (including both the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ man) offers challenge and opportunity - for personal growth, a new sense of connectedness, and new skills to negotiate the world of relationships.

Happy Fathers Day in a whole new way.

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This article draws on the author’s Master of Social Work thesis “Fathers in the Middle”, 1996, La Trobe University. Published in Stepfamily News, Spring 2001, Stepfamily Association of Victoria.