

## **STEPFAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA**

**A background paper prepared by the Stepfamily Association of Victoria Inc (SAVI)  
by Steve Martin, Executive Officer**

Comment [sa1]:

### **1. OUTLINE**

#### **1a) Status**

Stepfamilies currently have an ambivalent status in Australian society. Everybody knows someone in one, but few show up on official statistics. Often members do not identify as part of a stepfamily, and are unaware of its different needs. Misconceptions and unrealistic expectations based on the nuclear family model or myths are common and make stepfamily life more difficult.

#### **1b) Current social policy and resources**

Current social policy appears to focus mainly on 'intact' and 'sole parent' families. Stepfamilies often experience social isolation, legal confusion and callers report that they believed they were the only ones experiencing difficulty. Stepfamilies often feel blamed for the complexities that are a normal part of this family form. Few user-friendly resources exist to provide preventive support and education, or encourage empowerment and success.

#### **1c) An alternative approach**

The unique potentials of the stepfamily as an open and socially responsive family form are rarely mentioned. Given its increasing incidence, and the changing nature of the family in Australia, SAVI believes this approach is short sighted.

SAVI strongly believes that an early intervention approach, working for prevention of stepfamily breakdown, pays huge dividends for the wider community by strengthening family values and relationships. It also avoids the huge social, legal and economic costs of further separation and divorce for children, adults, communities and governments.

Stepfamilies are increasing as a proportion of Australian families - conservatively about one in five. The Australian community cannot afford to ignore their needs. Greater community recognition of stepfamilies' unique needs and demands will have the positive outcome of increasing the viability of this family type.

### **2. DEFINITIONS, DIFFERENCES AND DILEMMAS**

#### **2a) Definitions**

A stepfamily is any family where one or both partners have a child from a previous relationship. Stepchildren may live in the family, visit regularly / rarely / or not at all.

Stepfamilies represent at least 1 in 5 Australian families with dependent children, in our estimate.

Official statistics grossly understate stepfamily numbers. For example, A.B.S. figures of 7% only count stepfamilies as those where dependent children live in. Our experience and extensive social research show that families with children visiting experience similar stepfamily dilemmas and needs. So also do grandparents, and adults repartnering later in their life stages, yet stepfamilies without dependent children are also not acknowledged in A.B.S. figures. (see Appendix 1)

## **2b) Differences and Dilemmas**

Stepfamilies have complex structures and family dynamics. Services are only effective if they address these unique differences. Generic family services often miss the mark or fail to acknowledge the existence or needs of stepfamilies. For example, the book Victorian Families, produced for the International Year of the Family in 1994, ignored stepfamilies except for one graphic, while detailing the issues for other family types. This ignored key family issues for 20% of Victorian families.

Treating stepfamilies as having the same needs and dynamics as 'intact', or 'nuclear' families is a recipe for disaster. Key differences include:

- 1) a need to build a viable family out of a sense of failure or loss
- 2) family members come with different histories and expectations (like a company merger)
- 3) only one adult is a biological parent - stepparent roles are socially and legally undefined (except for unhelpful stereotypes such as 'Brady Bunch', and wicked stepmother - cruel stepfather) and need careful negotiation
- 4) children may be members of two households
- 5) financial and parenting obligations to a previous family often strain the new couple relationship
- 6) stepfamilies are complex - they have family forests rather than family trees

## **3. COMMUNITY SUPPORTS FOR STEPFAMILIES**

**3a)** Lack of resources and community recognition often means that stepfamilies experience a great sense of isolation. Stepfamilies need recognition of their complexity, difficulties and potential. Resources need to be based on a realistic model of stepfamily living.

**3b)** SAVI is one of few community-based organisations in Australia focussing on the specific needs of stepfamilies. With minimal resources, and continuing commitment from members, it has developed a growing role in providing services and resources to stepfamilies, professional training across Australia, advocating for stepfamilies and enhancing community awareness.

Since this paper was first written, some hopeful signs have emerged. The Stepfamily Association of South Australia has formed ([www.stepfamily.asn.au](http://www.stepfamily.asn.au)). We hope that further regional resource groups will form, and enrich the network of resources available to stepfamilies around Australia.

There are also an increasing number of organisations offering courses, inventories, and counselling for stepfamilies in each state.

Further resources are also being created. In 1999, SAVI published *Making Stepfamilies Work: a course for couples – Leaders Manual*, written by Irene Gerrard and Margaret Howden. In 2000, SAVI collaborated with LifeWorks, Education Image, and CARE to develop *BACK ON TRACK: finding a way through separation and repartnering*, published by the Child Support Agency ([www.csa.gov.au](http://www.csa.gov.au)).

**3c)** SAVI actively works to strengthen stepfamilies and prevent further family breakdown through a joint focus on:

- ⇒ developing and providing ‘hands on’ resources for stepfamilies
- ⇒ working to achieve more positive and supportive social, legal and political recognition for stepfamilies.

#### **4. STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA INC. (SAVI)**

##### **4a) Beginnings**

SAVI commenced as a self help group in 1981 and has been continuously active as a grass roots community based group in providing resources for stepfamilies in Victoria.

From small beginnings, successful programs have been developed and run by volunteers (several with professional expertise) over many years in direct response to demand, including

- a) education courses for couples in stepfamilies
- b) a metropolitan stepparent support group
- c) education and training for professionals working with stepfamilies
- d) community education
- e) telephone support and information (provided from members homes for many years).

##### **4b) Growth**

Since 1996 SAVI has achieved recognition and funding to expand services to

- a) establish an office
- b) provide phone information, support and referrals for the community
- c) offer regular educational courses for couples
- d) develop publications and training programs for professionals working with stepfamilies in educational and counselling roles
- e) enhance community and government awareness through conference presentations and joint ventures

#### **4c) Demand**

SAVI's increased accessibility has led to a dramatic increase in requests for help - from a few hundred to one thousand within eighteen months. Our experience shows that these requests represent the **tip of the iceberg**.

Requests from stepfamilies include

- a) numerous calls from stepfamilies in crisis for information, support and counselling
- b) requests to help start and maintain support groups
- c) requests for more education courses
- d) requests from rural and regional families and professionals for locally accessible resources
- e) requests from interstate stepfamilies for information and support

#### **4d) Community services sector recognition**

SAVI has achieved a broad and increasing base of recognition and support for its targeted work throughout and beyond the metropolitan area. This is evidenced in the health, education and social welfare sectors through

- a) increasing referral rate
- b) success of programs
- c) training requests
- d) consultancy requests
- e) requests to support research projects
- f) increasing media requests
- g) interstate training, consultations and networking

The Association's growing community profile has been achieved with minimal resources over an extended period since 1981, in a climate of shrinking government support to the community sector.

#### **4e) Future Development**

SAVI plans to extend its effectiveness through achieving the following goals:

1. Providing resources readily accessible to all Victorian stepfamilies, based on a realistic understanding of stepfamilies needs, to enhance stepfamily viability and success. These include information, support, on-line support, telephone counselling, education and access to face to face counselling through referral to counsellors with stepfamily expertise.

2. Developing and implementing training programs for health, welfare and education professionals to enhance their effectiveness in working with stepfamilies
3. Increase community understanding of the needs of stepfamilies at social, political, legal and community service delivery levels
4. Developing a National Association which will promote these goals nationally

## **APPENDIX 1 - STATISTICS**

### **1. A.B.S. statistics<sup>1</sup>**

- a) 43% of first marriages end in divorce - 50% for second / subsequent marriages
- b) 1 in every 3 marriages is a remarriage
- c) 978,400 children from 597,500 families have a natural parent living elsewhere
- d) 35% of stepfamily couples are in de facto relationships, compared to 6% of intact family couples.
- e) 'Non-traditional' families as a percent of all families with dependent children are increasing. While these figures understate total numbers, as noted above, they convey a sense of change over time. A.B.S. figures show they comprised
  - I) 20% in 1986
  - II) 25% in 1991
  - III) 28% in 1997 (21% sole parent families, 7% stepfamilies - understated as noted below. A more realistic total is 40%).
- f) A.B.S. only counts stepfamilies where dependent children live in - **7%** of couple families with dependent children (164,200 families with 363,800 children)

### **2. Note ON ABS Statistics**

**a)** A.B.S. definition of stepfamilies excludes stepfamilies where children visit. Up to an **extra 15%** of families could be **invisible stepfamilies**. Our estimate uses available A.B.S. data, together with research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies<sup>2</sup> which shows that 74% of non-resident fathers re-partner; 54 % of non-resident mothers re-partner. **This gives a total of approximately 1 in 5 families.**

**b)** Stepfamilies are also not counted by A.B.S. where children are no longer dependent, or couples re-partner at a later stage of life. This results in reports that stepfamilies are an even smaller percentage of the total number of Australian families (4%!) - another limitation of A.B.S. figures. Anecdotal evidence, and the growing divorce and remarriage rates, strongly suggests stepfamily numbers increase through the lifespan.

<sup>1</sup> Family Characteristics, April 1997. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Peter McDonald (1993) "Family Trends and Structures in Australia". Melbourne: A.I.F.S.

c) A.B.S. figures thus discount the real incidence of stepfamilies in Australia. They also cannot account for important issues concerning

- \* the role of extended family, especially grandparents, in supporting family viability
- \* the legal and emotional minefield of inheritance

d) **Youth Homelessness studies** also support the extent of need and the importance of resourcing stepfamilies: Chamberlain and MacKenzie report that **76%** of young homeless people come from 'alternative' family settings. This means mainly from stepfamilies and sole parent families.

e) **Anecdotal evidence** from social welfare agencies surveyed in Melbourne confirms that stepfamilies are over-represented as a proportion of client groups in many social welfare organisations. Workers stated that not only families, but also many of them as workers found stepfamily issues complex and difficult.