

# Stepfamilies: Understanding and responding effectively

Margaret Howden

**Stepfamilies in Australia are beginning to be recognised as a unique and important contemporary family form. This paper will combine literature and research with the experiences of staff at the Stepfamily Association of Victoria (SAVI) in delivering counselling, support and education to stepfamilies over the past 25 years. The paper discusses problems in defining and quantifying the number of stepfamilies, the complexities inherent in the contemporary stepfamily, and key differences between stepfamilies and nuclear families. Some ideas for change and early intervention strategies are outlined, and resources for stepfamilies are highlighted.**

Growing in numbers, stepfamilies are a significant symbol of the changing shape of families in Australia, yet social policy development in Australia to support stepfamilies' unique needs has been minimal (Martin 1998). Two factors contribute to this picture. Firstly, stepfamilies have often not been identified as a separate family form, but rather as a subcategory of the nuclear family. Secondly, stepfamily numbers have been underestimated in official collections of statistics – failure to acknowledge children's membership in two households has meant that statisticians usually record the household of one parent only in stepfamily estimates and fail to count that of the second parent, irrespective of residency arrangements.

The identification of stepfamilies within the community is not an easy task. Difficulties arise from problems with definitions and the use of different terms, which lead to confusion. Perhaps most concerning is the reluctance or non-recognition of stepfamilies themselves to be so named or identified, which will be discussed further below. These factors make determination of the number and characteristics of stepfamilies in Australia a problematic task.

## The stepfamily defined

The traditional definition of a stepfamily presumes that children live full-time within a particular household. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines stepfamilies as "...those formed when parents re-partner following separation, and where there is at least one step child



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## Contents

The stepfamily defined	1
The contemporary stepfamily	4
Box 1 – Comparison of Nuclear and Stepfamily models	5
Box 2 – Stepfamily Stages	9
Issues and Strategies for Practitioners	11
Strategies for working with stepfamilies	11
Summary and recommendations	13
Available resources	14
References	15

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of either member of the couple present.” (ABS, 2003: 6). The problem with such a definition is that it fails to recognise the changing pathways that lead to stepfamilies in modern Australia, where stepparent-child relationships often cross household boundaries (Qu & Weston, 2005). For example, this definition fails to include families in which children reside in the household part-time, or stepfamilies where the non-resident parent has re-partnered (Qu & Weston, 2005).

An additional problem is the use of confusing terminology. For example, ‘blended family’ is often used as a pseudonym for ‘stepfamily’. On the other hand, the ABS makes a distinction between stepfamily and blended family: a blended family contains a stepchild, but also a child born to both parents (ABS, 2003). One New Zealand study used refinements of the term – a ‘partial blended family’ comprised children of one parent only and a ‘full blended family’ had children of both parents. Children born to the couple were not included in the definition (Dharmalingam, Pool, Sceats & Mackay, 2004, p. 72). Other terms used to describe families are reconstituted, remarried, repartnered, merged, instant or synergistic instead of stepfamily, and ‘social parent’ may be used instead of stepparent.

SAVI considers a useful definition of stepfamily to be inclusive, making no distinction about gender, residence or amount of contact with children, and focusing on its unique structure. SAVI defines a stepfamily as *a family of two adults in a formal or informal marriage where at least one of the adults has children from a previous relationship. There may be children from the current union. Children may live-in full-time or part-time or may not currently have contact.* This definition does not distinguish between dependent and independent children.

## Numbers of Stepfamilies

The number of stepfamilies in Australia is difficult to estimate. Qu and Weston (2005) point out that most statistics focusing on families concentrate exclusively on relationships within household boundaries. They use the ABS definition of family as an example, where family is made up of persons who are “...usually resident in the same household.” (ABS, 2004: 71). Whilst this makes the number of families more measurable, it fails to differentiate between family types, which means that little national statistical information is available on blended and stepfamilies (de Vaus, 2004).

The ABS (2007) reports the current proportion of such families as 10.6% of couple families with children (6.6% stepfamilies, 4% blended families), a 50% increase over 10 years from 7% in 1996 (ABS 1998). Data from the *Household Income and Labour Dynamics* (HILDA)<sup>1</sup> survey suggest a similar number, with step- and blended families accounting for 8.9% of families with children under 18 years of age, and 9.9% of all couple families with children under 18 (de Vaus, 2004). SAVI, however, believes from experience that if part-time and non-resident families were taken into consideration, the estimate would be higher.

Acknowledgement of the increase in numbers of stepfamilies is slowly being reflected in research and practice but responses, while significant, remain fragmented. Longitudinal studies such as HILDA will go some way to redressing this situation. Because the survey is able to track changes to a family's composition, and seeks both qualitative and quantitative information from all family members over 15 years of age, it will provide valuable insights into the status of stepfamilies over time and the effects of family transitions. However, it does not include extended family data, that is, information on the households of both ex-partners if the couple separated prior to the beginning of the survey in 2001.<sup>2</sup> This limitation of HILDA is important in this context, because children in stepfamilies affect and are affected by both households, playing an important role in determining the nature of interactions between adults and children (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), and thus impacting on the wellbeing of each household.

Couples in both step (56%) and blended families (39%) were more likely than those in intact families (8%) to be in a de facto marriage (ABS 2003). No regular records exist of the breakdown of de facto relationships (Kilmartin, 1997; de Vaus & Gray, 2004), nor of the breakdown of second marriages, since the Family Court stopped collecting statistics of second divorces in 1994.

## Negativity and non-recognition

### *Cold as a stepmother's breath*

Issues associated with the stepfamily image further compound their lack of visibility in society. Many stepfamily members, perhaps willingly or unknowingly, fail to recognise their stepfamily status (Berger 1998; Visher, 1996, in Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004) and some disassociate themselves from the term 'step', e.g. "I am not the children's stepmother" (Participant in the *Making Stepfamilies Work* [MSW] course). This is understandable considering the myths and negativity about stepfamilies noted below that go hand in hand with the name. A name change could help, but the problem remains that, of the alternative terms outlined earlier, none has been universally recognised and accepted.

Historically the stepfamily is portrayed negatively in fairytales and mythology, with stepmothers particularly maligned as 'wicked'. Contemporary research findings perpetuate this view, with many studies emphasising the risks to children in stepfamilies (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Too few studies identify factors and processes that facilitate the development of healthy couple functioning and stepfamily relationships (Coleman, Ganong & Fine, 2000). Stepfamilies are also often viewed through a nuclear family lens. Unfortunately, this use of a nuclear family frame can maintain unhelpful stepfamily myths, privilege the biological parent role, and stigmatise the stepparent roles (Visher & Visher, 1979; Berger 1998).

Thus, stepfamilies are often unrecognised or unacknowledged within society. In part, a negative image that leads to reluctance to identify as a stepfamily may perpetuate their under-representation. At the same time, the contemporary stepfamily has a complex structure, and members face a number of notable challenges that are difficult to overlook. These challenges will be explored in the following section.

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- 1 The HILDA survey is being managed by a consortium including Melbourne University's Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Information on HILDA can be found at <http://melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/>.
  - 2 However, if the couple in the sample has separated post-2001 and the non-resident parent repartners, the new partner will be interviewed. If this couple has a child together, the new partner remains in the sample even if this new relationship dissolves.

## The contemporary stepfamily

### Stepfamily structure

#### *One size doesn't fit all*

Contemporary stepfamilies formed after divorce differ from those of past centuries, which were typically formed when a widowed parent remarried (Qu & Weston, 2005), particularly in their complexity. Differences are primarily in respect to the stepparent role, financial distribution and living arrangements with children (Howden, 2004). The structure of contemporary stepfamilies formed after a death, however, remains essentially the same as in the past, with the stepparent often becoming a replacement parent and children continuing to reside full-time in the household.

The contemporary stepfamily varies from the nuclear family in many ways. A comparison of stepfamilies and nuclear families is provided in Box 1; whilst some generalisations are made, it provides an idea of the variations that may occur.

As a result, the nuclear family example of mum, dad and 2.5 children does not exist for stepfamilies. The following examples provided by participants in MSW courses illustrate this variation.

- A widower with a daughter (13) and son (10) married a divorcee with one son (10). Neither has close family support. One set of grandparents lives interstate and the other overseas. The divorcee's son visits his dad who lives overseas each school holidays.
- A 'living together-apart'<sup>3</sup> married couple who are working to resume life in one household. The resident father has two boys (14 and 12), whose unplanned arrival in the household coincided with the birth of their 'ours' baby 18 months ago. The boys' mother is remarried with a child of 11 months. The stepmother was previously married with no children.
- A non-resident mother with one boy aged (9) is cohabiting with a stepmother in a same sex relationship.
- A 'his', 'hers' and 'ours' family. The father has one biological son (11), and the mother has two biological children, a boy, 16, and girl, 13, who all live in the same household. They have an 'ours' three-year-old daughter. Shared parenting arrangements see children moving in and out for five and four days each week. The whole stepfamily is together on two separate nights each week. One ex-partner has re-partnered and has two young adult stepchildren.

These examples indicate that the structural characteristics of step- and nuclear families are markedly different. It follows that relationship dynamics are also likely to be complex, and these complexities are examined in the remainder of this section.

### Complex relationships and dynamics

#### *A family forest not a family tree*

There is an increase in the number of family members and a corresponding rise in the complexity of relationships when the stepfamily is formed (Visher & Visher, 1979). Children become instant members of a second family and extended family, yet the impact of this added complexity has not been well documented (Coleman et al., 2000; Nicholson, Phillips, Peterson & Battistutta, 2000). Pryor and Rodgers (2001) indicate that children in stepfamilies are at a similar risk as those in lone parent families, including the early adoption of adult roles such as entering the workforce, having children and forming intimate relationships. Subsequent studies have reported a range of findings. For example, Marks (2006) indicated that large family size plus complex structure did not have a detrimental effect on children's academic achievements. Brown (2006) found that the transition into a stepfamily increases the chances of a negative impact on adolescents' wellbeing. Few studies have focused on characteristics of stepfamilies that succeed. One study (Michaels, 2006) found that a strong couple-bond and widespread acceptance of the new marriage and family might be equally important for wellbeing.

3 *Living together-apart* is a strategy adopted by couples who are committed to their relationship but either decide against sharing their household or who find the 'live in' situation untenable.

## Box 1 – Comparison of Nuclear and Stepfamily models

	Nuclear Family model	Stepfamily model
<b>Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Couple relationship established before children</li> <li>• Blood ties between members</li> <li>• Family members are often close – love emphasised</li> <li>• Continuous</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child/parent relationship precedes couple relationship</li> <li>• No blood tie between some members</li> <li>• Relationships may not be close – respect emphasised</li> <li>• A biological parent elsewhere has influence on members</li> <li>• Intermittent separation of children and each parent</li> </ul>
<b>Adults</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Couple</li> <li>• Roles</li> <li>• Loyalty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distinct unit</li> <li>• Biological parents – ascribed by birth</li> <li>• Couple bond predates children</li> <li>• Complex extended relationships</li> <li>• Stepparent – achieved over time</li> <li>• Biological parent can feel torn between children and new partner</li> </ul>
<b>Children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residence</li> <li>• Siblings</li> <li>• Loyalty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Members of one household</li> <li>• Family position fixed</li> <li>• Loyalty conflicts are less likely</li> <li>• Often part-time residents of two households</li> <li>• Sibling order can change</li> <li>• Children can often feel torn between parents or stepparent and parent</li> </ul>
<b>Discipline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equal parental relationship</li> <li>• Established over time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unequal adult relationship</li> <li>• Different parental status</li> <li>• Negotiated on the run</li> </ul>
<b>Membership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fluid – household size fluctuates</li> </ul>
<b>Family history</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time for bonding</li> <li>• History and traditions evolved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instant family, that may or may not be accepted as such by members</li> <li>• Little or no shared history</li> <li>• Original members have experienced major losses</li> </ul>
<b>Sexuality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevailing incest taboos</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incest taboo weakened</li> <li>• Adult sexuality heightened</li> <li>• Privacy rules need emphasis</li> </ul>
<b>Finances</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joint – confined to one household</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Split – between households</li> </ul>
<b>Legal status</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly defined</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unclear</li> </ul>
<b>Change negotiated</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within the family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often subject to outside influence and control</li> </ul>
<b>Life cycles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uninterrupted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complicated by divorce/death</li> </ul>
<b>Societal support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partial acknowledgement</li> </ul>

With the reduction of family size in the general population (de Vaus, 2004) single-child stepfamilies are more likely. Practice wisdom derived from Stepfamily Helpline and MSW courses suggests that single-child stepfamilies have no fewer issues in adjustment than those with several children. When a close bond has formed between a parent and child during the single-parent phase, it is more difficult for the 'outsider' stepparent to be included. On the other hand, the new couple's relationship can lead to a child feeling or being excluded (Sager, Brown, Crohn, Engel, Rodstein & Walker, 1983). In either case, feelings of loss are heightened for children when a lone parent-child relationship that has existed over a number of years is restructured to include another member (Visher & Visher, 1979; Sager et al, 1983).<sup>4</sup>

For adults, an unequal relationship exists as the executive heads of the stepfamily household. The blood tie, close bonds and shared history between a biological parent and his or her children places that parent in a stronger position than the stepparent, and this can be reflected in Family Court processes that may not routinely include stepparents (Gately, Pike & Murphy, 2006). From this position of structural inequality, a strong couple relationship has to be forged 'on the run', whilst meeting the ongoing demands of family life (Berger 1998).

## Adult-child relationships

### *Blood is thicker than water*

The stepparent is not a replacement parent, but rather an extra adult in the lives of children. Their role is often ambiguous. It is not prescribed nor need it be limited by tradition, although Wright (1998) attributes some role strain experienced by stepmothers to their responsibilities for children being greater than their power. Webber (1994, 1996) notes many possible positive, negative and neutral stepparent roles.<sup>5</sup> SAVI's experience suggests that the stepparent role is shaped by personalities, ages, level of acceptance of and by stepchildren, expectations of children (also mentioned by Cartwright, 2005) and adults, plus the stepparent's life experience.

The stepparent-child relationship needs to be seen in this context. The shared connection to the biological parent is their reason for being together; they often come together as strangers with no common interests or feelings of mutual attraction. Feelings of resentment towards the stepparent for having supplanted the child's 'rightful' place in his or her parent's affections can surface. An adult stepchild recalls: "I was feral. After I had taken the car engine down I used to leave nuts and bolts on the lawn just to annoy him (stepfather)...He's a really good bloke." (Participant in MSW course). The unequal status of the child may be reinforced when it is realised that the child has no say in their parent's decision to re-partner, and this can lead to strong emotions. In some cases the children may not have been informed about these plans (Cartwright, 2005).

The parenting style adopted by both biological parents and stepparents appears to be influential upon child and adolescent wellbeing. Authoritative, or 'warm but firm' parenting, is generally considered to be the most desirable form of parenting (Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan, 1999). Nicholson, Phillips, Peterson and Battistutta (1998) found that parenting practices, particularly the combination of parenting styles used by the parent and stepparent, were associated with adjustment in young adulthood in their study. Those who had experienced a disengaged or neglectful parenting style by both biological parent and stepparent had the poorest outcomes, such as engagement in violent crime or heavy drug use, whereas one or both parents using authoritative parenting styles was protective against adverse outcomes. It seems, however, that authoritative parenting is often hard to adopt, particularly for stepparents. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) indicate that, particularly in the early phases of a stepfamily, authoritative parenting is difficult for stepfathers to adopt and, in fact, authoritative parenting is less likely to occur in stepfamilies overall, even by biological parents. In adolescence, however, there is some suggestion that permissive step parenting is not only desired by children, but may be optimal for them (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> See further discussion in the section 'Key Differences – Foundation in Loss'.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are: Positive – parent-like, friend-like; Neutral – detached acquaintance; Negative – authoritarian stepparent, hostile-detached role.

Given these complexities, it is perhaps remarkable that so many step relationships work as well as they do. In a study of stepchildren and their families in New Zealand, Pryor (2005) found that, even though both children and their stepparents rated their relationships as less positive than other adult-child relationships, none of the ratings were low (that is, mean scores reflected 'moderately happy and close' relationships). The security of a stepparent-child relationship impacts on a child's self-concept, indicating that the child-stepparent relationship is salient for wellbeing. Interestingly, Pryor (2005) also indicated that children can accept parenting figures into their lives without having to substitute or lose existing parenting figures, which is good news for biological parents who fear they will be replaced.

In creating a stepfamily, extended family members, particularly grandparents, can also be confused about their position. According to Ochiltree (2006), after the divorce or remarriage of children, grandparents fit into a range of different relationship patterns with children and grandchildren that illuminate intergenerational relationships pre- and post-divorce. Grandparents may have trouble accepting the newly-formed family relationships and/or experience loyalty conflicts, particularly regarding their relationship with an ex-daughter- or son-in-law. Their own adult child can perceive the maintenance of contact with an ex-partner as an act of disloyalty. Additionally, the role of some grandparents, who may have taken on surrogate parenting of their grandchildren during the lone parent stage, can change dramatically when the new stepfamily is formed. These complexities can create difficulties for researchers examining roles in separated/re-partnered families (Ochiltree, 2006).

## Change and Uncertainty

### *It ebbs and flows like the tide*

Stepfamily membership is fluid. Changes to the family constellation can be either planned or unexpected. Families report to SAVI that contact arrangements with children often change on a week-to-week-basis to accommodate everyday demands of children being sick, playing sport, attending parties, school camps, and so on. Moving between residences occurs at the request of either the children or adults, and particularly during adolescence. Children who have been out of contact with one parent may sometimes reappear. Shared residence arrangements may see a shift from the previous pattern of children living predominantly in one household to sharing time more equally between homes. Where both adults have children, these arrangements can become particularly complex (Smyth, 2004).

This movement between households can complicate the development of routines, especially when children are living with different sets of rules and expectations in each household. Furthermore, both adults and children alike can feel like invaders or the invaded. The potential for misunderstandings and heightened emotions is constant given the number of people involved, discontinuity of routines, time constraints, limited resources and different family histories. Because of this complexity, all workings in the stepfamily need to be conscious, planned and negotiated, rather than just something that happens (Papernow, 2006).

## Relationships between ex-partners

### *The X factor*

There is a growing trend for both parents to remain involved following divorce and, when free of conflict, this can benefit children (Smyth, 2004). Smyth argues that contact time with children, however, may be reduced when a parent re-partners. How much these changes are influenced by the stepparent is unclear, however an issue for new stepparents is often the level and frequency of involvement between ex-partners. Children's interests need to be uppermost, yet all parties, including biological parents and stepparents, need to be considered. As one participant in a focus group observed: "It doesn't really matter what the arrangements are as long as they accommodate everybody's needs" (Smyth, 2004, p. 100).

The impact of over- and under-involved ex-partners is significant. Over a typical six-month period, 20 percent of counselling calls to the Stepfamily Helpline involved issues with an ex-partner. Matters that can cause tension between the step- and biological parent may not always appear problematic to an outsider; for example, Papernow (2006) cites very friendly ex-partners as being problematic. Issues for stepparents calling the Helpline included perceived overstepping

of boundaries such as regular, long phone calls, lack of negotiation in regards to children and the retention of house keys.

The damaging effects for children of ongoing parental conflict have been well researched (e.g. McIntosh & Long, 2005), but sometimes it is the avoidance of conflict that causes problems. Non-resident parents in the MSW courses often report being reluctant to stand up to an ex-partner for fear of losing further contact with his/her children, but that this reluctance can compromise the situation with his/her new partner. On the other hand, some fathers become disengaged because of difficulties with an ex-partner. Smyth (2004) suggests that ex-partners can be absent physically, financially and/or emotionally, but it is the lack of father-child contact that has a significant effect on adults and children. Father absence is one of the many factors associated with a range of children's problems from poor academic achievement to youth suicide, although causality is not implied (Amato 2001; Pryor & Rodgers 2001; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2002). Comments by fathers in a focus group suggest that fathers deprived of contact with their children experienced grief, despair, frustration and anger with their situation, and this sometimes leads to paternal disengagement (Smyth, 2004).

## Legal and Financial Differences

Flexibility and control to negotiate change in relation to children's needs are factors often outside the stepfamily's control. Many different parties can exert influence, including an ex-partner, the Family Court and/or the Child Support Agency. This is a very different experience from that of the nuclear family, where parents are able to make and change arrangements at will.

The stepfamily's financial situation can be confusing with regards to distribution and responsibilities. Although the stepparent's legal status is unclear, in certain circumstances the Family Law Act imposes financial responsibility for stepchildren upon them (Monahan & Young, 2006). Some stepparents who have contacted the SAVI Helpline and/or the online support group report feeling antipathy about supporting their stepchildren, particularly if the biological parent is not contributing financially and/or providing care, and when stepchildren do not accept them or are hostile. In the reverse scenario, a sense of unfairness is often felt by non-resident parents (usually fathers) who are required to support their children from a previous relationship; one issue that arose in a recent study of attitudes to child support was the unfairness of having no say in the amount contributed or the way this money is used (Smyth & Weston, 2005).

Data from the Australian Divorce Transitions Project (Weston & Smyth, 2000) indicated that re-partnered families tend to be better off financially than lone parent families, but this depends on factors such as number of children and income levels pre-separation. Parents who are in receipt of income support are more likely to separate than middle- and high-income families (Bradbury & Norris, 2005), meaning that child support transactions are more likely to be minimal. Murphy (1998), who considers a wider definition of poverty that includes non-financial dimensions such as choice, access and hope, suggests that many stepfamilies could be considered to be in poverty. While recent changes to the Child Support Scheme (FaCSIA, 2006) may ameliorate this situation, supporting two families remains a structural and financial stress for many stepfamilies.

## Foundation in loss

In stepfamilies, transitions and loss are inextricably intertwined. Feelings of loss can often be rekindled when the stepfamily is formed, with adults and children both being affected. Children's age is a factor: in one study it was found that children under five and over eighteen tend to adapt more easily than children between five and eighteen (Sager et al, 1983). While the experience of loss following the break-up of a marriage is generally acknowledged, the experience of grief in stepfamilies is less well understood or sanctioned, and a key task is to integrate the losses felt by family members whilst also working towards a viable future (Gerrard, 2002).

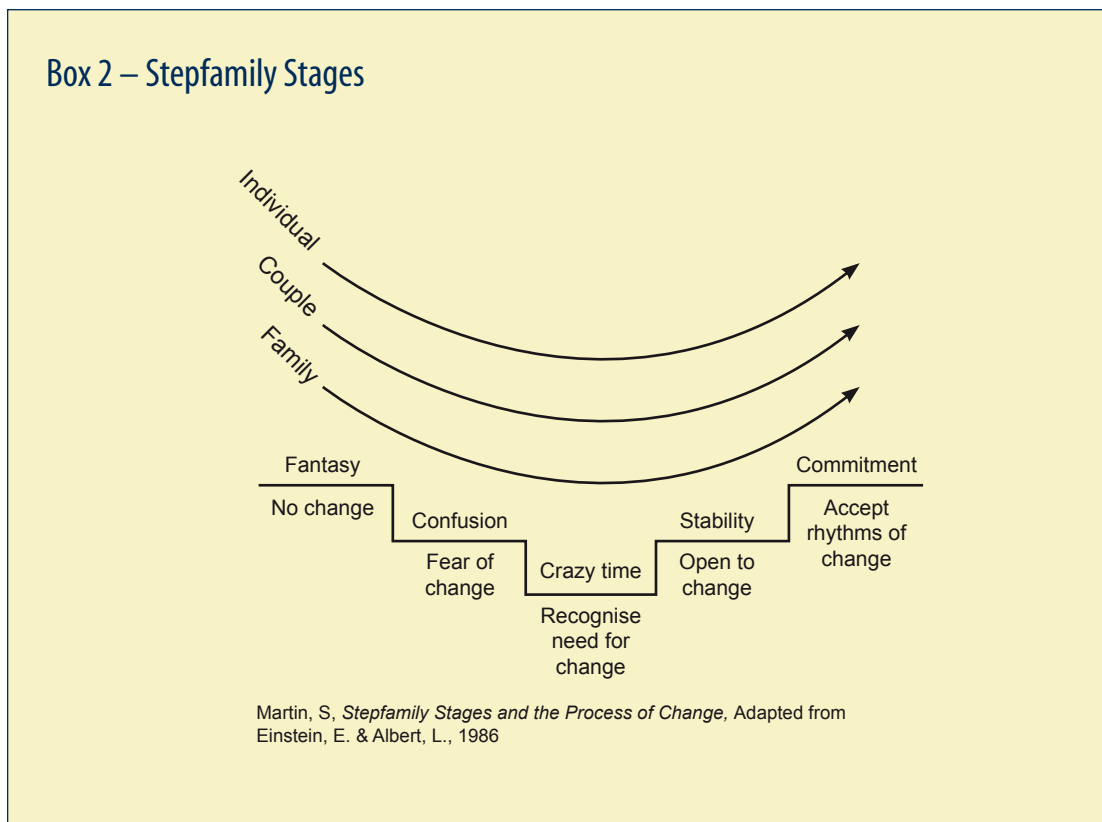
Numerous authors report that children frequently experience the arrival of a stepparent and stepsiblings as a loss of their family as they knew it, and grieve the dilution of that special child-parent bond (Howden, 2004; Newman, 2004; Sager et al, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1979). For the biological parents, continuing parenting responsibilities with his/her ex-partner precludes a clean break, which can reduce the opportunity for the biological parent to grieve the past. Added to this are the feelings of loss experienced by the biological parent and children each



time that children leave to stay with their other parent on contact visits. Less obvious are the losses experienced by a stepparent. First family rites of passage and sequencing of relationships are not available to the stepparent, because it has all happened before for the biological parent (Gerrard, 2002).

### Potential for extreme feelings

Stepfamily members can feel a range of unexpected, uncomfortable but strong emotions, as they jostle to either find or maintain their place within the new family structure, and handle issues of rejection and acceptance (Sager et al, 1983; Visher 1994). For example, exclusion of children from plans made within the family (Cartwright, 2005) and exclusion of stepparents in plans made by authorities such as courts (Gately et al., 2006) can have serious repercussions for family relationships, giving rise to conflict between family members. Such conflict is normal, however, and is so common that a crisis stage has been incorporated into a theory of stepfamily stages, as illustrated in Box 2 below.



Discipline is also often an area of contention (Ferri & Smith, 1998; Hetherington, Henderson & Reiss, 1999). Participants in the MSW courses report that it is often the transition from a laissez faire or democratic parenting style that is the cause for children's (and sometimes a biological parent's) animosity, when the stepparent wishes to have a say in establishing limits and routines appropriate to the new family. Papernow (2006) suggests that the stepfamily 'architecture' pushes adults into opposing parenting styles, but an added complication is that step- and biological parents often have a different perspective of the same event. For example, attempts by the stepparent to tighten rules may be perceived by the biological parent as being 'too harsh', with their response then perceived by the stepparent as 'too soft'. Gerrard (in Gerrard & Howden, 1998) proposed a Step-Biol Feedback Loop (see Box 3), which describes the 'escalating dance' ensuing as each adult adjusts their parenting in response to their perception of the other's behaviour. The model is useful in therapy and group education.

### Box 3

#### Step/Biol Feedback Loop – adapted from Gerrard (in Gerrard & Howden, 1998)

A common dynamic between couples is the critiquing of each other's parenting. This has the potential to be more problematic in a stepfamily because of the different status of the adults. The biological parent often experiences the stepparent as being too strict while the stepparent often experiences the biological parent as being too lenient.

#### Different Parental Status

Adults in the stepfamily frequently have different parenting experience and expectations.

The biological parent has strong ties to his/her children through a blood tie, shared history, and a parenting style which has evolved over time. They often have a tolerance of their children's behaviour, a strong commitment to their style of parenting and limited trust in the development of the stepparent/stepchild relationship independent of their 'help'. The stepparent, on the other hand, is not related by blood, has no shared experience of parenting their partner's children and sometimes no parenting experience. Often the stepchild's behaviour does not match up with the stepparent's expectations.

#### The Step/Biol Feedback Loop

A feedback loop occurs when one adult adjusts their disciplining to counteract what they perceive as their partner's actions, such as being too harsh or too soft and easily manipulated. The dynamic occurs when, for example, the stepparent interprets the biological parent's disciplining as being too lenient, the stepparent attempts to 'right' the situation by becoming more firm. In response the biological parent becomes more lenient and this dynamic escalates as each makes counter adjustments.

Developing new ways of parenting is a process that takes time, and while adults can recognise the need to reach agreement on strategies, the implementation of these is vexed. The nuclear family 'adult coalition' is often not appropriate any more because children's losses and loyalty to their biological parents often gives rise to indifference to or rejection of the stepparent (Papernow 2006). Furthermore, some children and adolescents view the biological parent's acceptance of the stepparent in a disciplinary role as a loss of parental loyalty (Cartwright, 2005). To ease the transition, many practitioners recommend that the stepparent develop a relationship with stepchildren before disciplining them. Moore and Cartwright (2005) found adolescents expected their biological parent to maintain primary responsibility for discipline, and the stepparent to play a lesser role. Child-centred studies such as these are valuable for providing insights into children's views and experiences.

### Vulnerability to breakdown

The rate of breakdown is higher in stepfamilies than first families, with the stresses inherent in the structure and processes often being the cause, particularly in the early years (Coleman et al., 2000). At this stage strategies, roles, rules and traditions may not have been developed, and losses may still be keenly felt. The stepparent position can be rewarding in the long term, but more immediately it can be experienced as isolating and undermining as the stepparent searches for a meaningful place in the stepfamily. The biological parent, on the other hand, can be torn between loyalties to his/her children and new partner, and children often wish to reunite their parents (Sager et al, 1983; Visher & Visher, 1979). It takes a strong couple bond, sensitivity to children and plenty of good will to weather the early storms, not to mention problems that arise subsequently as children grow and develop cognitively.

In summary, stepfamilies face a range of complex situations and emotions arising from the stepfamily's structure, current and past relationship complexities and financial and legal constraints. These complex circumstances require a new, considered response. Practitioners who work with stepfamilies are in a key position to instigate some of the changes needed, to ensure that appropriate information, resources and support are available.

## Issues and Strategies for Practitioners

Stepfamily members have the potential to build resilient, flexible, creative family solutions. Some stepfamilies meet these goals through the process of surviving loss and change and the experience of stepfamily living. Others require education and support or benefit from more intensive individual, couple and family counselling. When coupled with a generosity of spirit, this can lead to the formation of a large cooperative tribe.

In the broader context, normalising experiences and introducing concepts relevant to stepfamilies can promote wellbeing (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Michaels, 2000; Nicholson, 1998). One of the ways this can be achieved is by being aware of and addressing in practice the use of inconsistent language and inadequate definitions of stepfamilies. Due to increasing stepfamily numbers, it is also important that practitioners, researchers and policy-makers become more familiar with stepfamily issues. Importantly, they can help improve the stepfamily image by consistently reframing the stepfamily as a worthwhile contemporary family form.

### Life cycle stages

SAVI's experience is that stepfamilies are often enormously relieved to learn that there are stages in a stepfamily's development (see Box 2 above) and talking the family through these can be an important part of the practitioner's role.

Most stepfamilies go through stages, which may include:

- **Fantasy:** there is an expectation that this stepfamily will be one big happy family. Parents are looking to the future while children wish their parents were re-united.
- **Confusion:** this begins when family members sense that something is wrong. The stepparent is often the first to notice.
- **Crazy time:** there may be highly emotional times when the stepfamily is divided and members take sides. Issues are out in the open but not resolved.
- **Stability:** the stepfamily begins to stabilise and there is a sense of 'us' or 'our family'. The stepparent has a clearly established role.
- **Commitment:** there is an ongoing commitment to making sure this family continues to work, an acceptance of the past and of the rhythms of change.

A complex interplay exists between family, couple and individual developmental stages. The 'normal' individual and family life cycles are compounded by the unplanned crises of separation, divorce, or death, and the formation of the new stepfamily.

Couple life cycles in a stepfamily often may not be synchronised, for example when one partner has children and the other not, or where one has pre-school children and the other has adult children. This is also true for family life cycles, for example, stepfamilies with an adolescent need to manage the contradiction between the adolescent's normal tasks of individuating from the family, and the normal developmental tasks of forming the new stepfamily by bringing individuals together (Gerrard & Howden, 1998).

Service and practitioner responses will ideally be tailored to suit the needs of stepfamilies and their members. Readily available support and education, provided through printed information, telephone and Internet, and counselling/education are essential for many stepfamilies, particularly but not exclusively in the early stages. SAVI has found that a combination of counselling and group education is also beneficial to families who require more individual assistance. Services need to be welcoming and meet stepfamily needs, taking into account the complex structure of relationships, as well as the often-limited resources of money and time. Some specific challenges and suggestions for mainstream practitioners and services to introduce into their work are offered below.

### Strategies for working with stepfamilies

The following suggestions are based on the experience of SAVI practitioners:

- Use a stepfamily model (see Box 1) as a frame of reference when implementing strategies.
- Work with stepfamily groups to help normalise experiences and reduce a sense of isolation.

- Work with the stepfamily couple in the early stages.
- Take a proactive role to educate stepfamilies using a stepfamily model which normalises<sup>6</sup>:
  - distance between family members;
  - relationships built on respect not love;
  - changing family constellations, including children having contact with both parents and movement between their homes;
  - negotiation of workable stepparent roles;
  - expression of strong emotions; and
  - length of time needed to make this family 'work'.
- Encourage individual solutions to problems. These may be different from 'normal' societal expectations, for example 'living together apart' does not mean the stepfamily has failed, but is finding the best way of handling issues *at this stage*.
- 'Time out' can provide much needed space for adults and children in times of stress and conflict. When this is not imposed on children as a punishment, time spent at either the other parent's household or a relative's home can result in a positive outcome.
- Many issues are ongoing, so implement strategies to best manage these and the concomitant strong feelings experienced by biological parents, stepparents and children. New issues may arise, e.g. when a child becomes an adolescent and challenges a stepparent's authority, and the means of handling such issues can be developed proactively.
- Communication skills, conflict resolution skills and parenting knowledge (using a stepfamily frame) are important.

#### **Practitioners can help families in the following ways:**

- Give the couple permission to have a relationship and help them firm the couple bond. This is the crux of a successful stepfamily.
- Emphasise the importance of moving slowly; plan only two or three changes at a time.
- Encourage them to continue to do things in original family groups.
- Provide strategies to help 'outsiders' become 'insiders'.
- Encourage them to acknowledge children's sense of powerlessness and reassure them of their continued place and importance in the family.
- Acknowledge the stepfamily and stepparent's position as legitimate. A new stepparent is often overlooked or excluded from occasions such as celebrations; children's non-acceptance can be an issue.
- Help stepfamily members establish clear, open, family boundaries, acknowledging all family members:
  - help the stepparent accept past and ongoing family relationships;
  - support the biological parent to work through unresolved separation issues;
  - encourage a working relationship with an ex-partner;
  - encourage them to keep the future in view, so that nodal events such as graduations and weddings can be enjoyed or more easily tolerated by everyone; and
  - help children maintain contact with both parents.
- Provide information to help develop different methods of discipline. It usually works best if, in the initial stages, the biological parent continues to implement discipline and the stepparent acts as a backup to the parent.
- Help adults work as a team to make joint decisions. Encourage the biological parent to discuss issues with their new partner before making decisions in regard to their ex-partner and biological children.
- Use Step/Biol Feedback Loop exercise (Gerrard & Howden, 1998) (see Box 3) to promote understanding and change.

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<sup>6</sup> See Papernow (2006) for further information.

- Help the stepparent develop his or her role, and the biological parent to make adjustments that acknowledges the stepparent's role in the family.

### Practitioner's beliefs, values and emotions

To work effectively with stepfamilies, practitioners should:

- Become aware of their assumptions and any prejudices about stepfamilies.
- Challenge stepfamily myths and beliefs founded on a nuclear family model.
- Promote hope and emphasise the importance of time by helping families see the early issues as part of a gradual, long-term process.

### Summary and recommendations

Stepfamilies are one of the fastest growing family forms in Australia. With higher breakdown rates than nuclear families, attention to issues that undermine stepfamily stability is critical. It is more important than ever that practitioners, researchers and policy-makers become more familiar with stepfamily issues. Importantly, they can help improve the image of the stepfamily by consistently reframing it as a workable contemporary family form.

Flexibility is just part of stepfamily living. Stepfamilies can be encouraged to find workable solutions, incorporating the development of new traditions that allow for the movement of children between households. Traditions around family celebrations need to accommodate restraints of time and place, as well as keeping the immediate and extended family members happy to the extent possible. A wealth of opportunities is afforded those who develop cooperative partnerships with their ex-partners, in terms of providing positive alternatives for all involved. All of these strategies will help to ensure stepfamily wellbeing.

The following recommendations are based on the information and research outlined in this paper, to assist in service provision, research and policy-making:

1. The experiences of the Stepfamily Association of Victoria, in conjunction with the literature presented in this paper, indicate that research, policy development and practice need to take account of the differences between the stepfamily and the nuclear family. Currently the stepfamily is often compared with the nuclear family, and unfavourably so.

Recommendation:

- A comprehensive stepfamily model is developed that can be used by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. The model needs to take into account structural and role differences, more realistic expectations about the quality of relationships, time needed for adjustments and, importantly, the model needs to be affirming and accepting of stepfamilies.
2. Most research studies are a snapshot in time, and these can be taken during a period of upheaval and stress. Problems with less than optimal relationships can often be resolved given time.

Recommendations:

- When assessing stepfamily functioning, a longitudinal approach is called for. Attention needs to be given to changes over time, which would make research and practice more dynamic and responsive to how stepfamilies evolve.
  - Further child-centred research is needed to complement research into adults' experiences.
  - Research into relationship qualities using a solution rather than problem focus, and recognition of all family members (residential and non-residential, step- and biological) will serve to build up a body of knowledge more representative of stepfamilies experiences and more responsive to their needs.
3. Issues of inconsistent language and inadequate definitions of stepfamilies permeate research, policy and practice discussions, and hold back broader community understanding of stepfamilies.

Recommendation:

- The development and adoption of consistent, non-stigmatising language acceptable to

all stakeholders is critical, as is acceptance of a definition inclusive of the experience of all stepfamilies.

4. Lack of statistics on formation and breakdown for both de facto and married stepfamilies limit our understanding of stepfamily stability.

Recommendation:

- That more comprehensive statistics be collected to assist understanding of this increasingly common family type.
5. In researching this paper, SAVI uncovered evidence of excellent contributions to stepfamily knowledge and practice from researchers and practitioners working largely in isolation from each other.

Recommendation:

- Development of networks to encourage sharing of best practice is necessary to promote and implement effective ways of working with stepfamilies.
6. Stepfamily issues currently have a low profile with researchers, policy makers and practitioners relative to the prevalence of and challenges encountered by stepfamilies, including the increased risk of family breakdown.

Recommendations:

- More attention to stepfamily issues is needed through development of coordinated programs of research, evaluation and dissemination of best practice to practitioners, with particular attention to prevention and early intervention.

## Available resources

### Australian Government Resources

Australian Institute of Family Studies: [www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au)

Child Support Agency, (2000). *Back on Track*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Child Support Agency, (2006). *Me and My Changing Family*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca>

Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, (2007). *Keys to Living DVD*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Family Relationships Online: [www.familyrelationships.gov.au](http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au)

### Stepfamily Associations

New South Wales: Stepfamily Association of New South Wales  
Email: [stepfamilynsw@hotmail.com](mailto:stepfamilynsw@hotmail.com)

Queensland: Stepfamily Association of Queensland  
[www.stepfamilyqld.org.au](http://www.stepfamilyqld.org.au)

South Australia: Stepfamily Association of South Australia  
[www.stepfamily.asn.au](http://www.stepfamily.asn.au)

Victoria: Stepfamily Association of Victoria  
[www.stepfamily.org.au](http://www.stepfamily.org.au)  
Stepfamily Helpline 03 9481 1500

Western Australia: Stepfamily Association of Western Australia  
[www.stepfamilywa.websyte.com.au](http://www.stepfamilywa.websyte.com.au)

## Other resources

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