Abstract

Stepfamilies have become living laboratories for what it takes to create successful relationships; they reveal surprising things about marriage, gender relations, parenting and the intricacies of family life. The keys to a successful stepfamily are discussed.

Full Text

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Here we are, three decades into the divorce revolution, and we still don't quite know what to make of stepfamilies. We love the Brady Bunch, but that was before we discovered how unreal they were. Now that stepfamilies embrace one of three children and, one way or another, impact the vast majority of Americans, we can't seem to get past seeing them as the spawn of failure, the shadow side of our overidealized traditional family. When we think of them at all, we see only what they are not--hence their designation as "nontraditional" families, heaped with unwed moms, gay parents, and other permutations that make up the majority of families today. By the year 2000, stepfamilies will outnumber all other family types.

Despite their ambiguous standing, stepfamilies are getting first-class attention from social scientists. Much of what they are discovering is eye-opening. Although, for example, it is widely known that second marriages are less stable than first ones--with a break-up rate of 60 percent, versus 50 percent for first marriages--that statistic paints stepfamilies with too broad a brush; it conceals their very real success. A far more useful, more important fact is that stepfamilies do indeed face instability, but that shakiness occurs early in remarriage--and may ultimately be traced to lack of support from the culture. In denying them the status of "real family," we may be doing much to undermine their chances of success. Nevertheless, once remarriage families make it over the early hurdle, they are even stronger than traditional families.

Let this turnabout truth serve as a metaphor for what is now coming to light about stepfamilies. They are certainly more complex than first-marriage families--but they are also richer. New information about what really goes on, and what goes wrong, in stepfamilies will definitely change the way you think about them. It also promises to change the way you think about all families. Among the new findings:

* Contrary to myth, stepfamilies have a high rate of success in raising healthy children. Eighty percent of the kids come out fine.

* These stepkids are resilient, and a movement to study their resilience--not just their problems--promises to help more kids succeed in any kind of family, traditional or otherwise.

* What trips stepkids up has little to do with stepfamilies per se. The biggest source of problems for kids in stepfamilies is parental conflict leftover from the first marriage.

* A detailed understanding of the specific problems stepfamilies encounter now exists, courtesy of longitudinal research--not studies that tap just the first six months of stepfamily adjustment.

* Stepfamilies turn out to be a gender trap--expectations about women's roles and responsibilities are at the root of many problems that develop in stepfamilies.

* After five years, stepfamilies are more stable than first-marriage families, because second marriages are happier than first marriages. Stepfamilies experience most of their troubles in the first two years.

* Stepfamilies are not just make-do households limping along after loss. All members experience real gains, notably the opportunity to thrive under a happier relationship.

* The needs of people in stepfamilies are the needs of people in all families--to be accepted, loved, and cared about; to maintain attachments; to belong to a group and not be a stranger; and to feel some control by

maintaining order in their lives. It's just that these needs are made acutely visible--and unavoidable--in stepfamilies.

THE MYTHS AND THE RESEARCH

Despite the prevalence of stepfamilies, myths about them abound. You probably know some of them: There's an Evil Stepmother, mean, manipulative, and jealous. The stepfather is a molester, a sexual suspect--Woody Allen. The ex-wife is victimized, vindictive, interfering--a She-Devil. The ex-husband is withdrawn, inept, the contemporary Absentee Father. And the kids are nuisances intent on ruining their parents' lives; like Maisie in Henry James' story of 19th century post-divorce life, they play the parents and stepparents like billiard balls.

The familiarity of these myths can't be blamed solely on Dan Quayle, nor on nostalgia for the 1950s. Stepfamilies are a challenge. There are attachments that must be maintained through a web of conflicting emotions. There are ambiguities of identity, especially in the first years. Adults entering stepfamilies rightly feel anxious about their performance in multiple roles (spouse, instant parent) and about their acceptance by the kids and by the ex-spouse, who must remain a caring parent to the children. When an ex-spouse's children become someone else's stepchildren and spend time in a "stranger's" home, he or she worries about the children's comfort, their role models--and their loyalty.

Out of this worry are born the mythic stereotypes--and the fear of reliving a bad fairy tale. A stepmother, for example, forced to take on the role of disciplinarian because the children's biological father may lack a clear understanding of his own responsibilities--is set up to be cast as evil.

Still, there is a growing recognition among researchers that for every real pitfall a myth is built on, stepfamilies offer a positive opportunity in return. Researchers and stepfamilies are asking questions about resilience and health, not just pathology. In "The Family In Transition," a special issue of the Journal of Family Psychology in June 1993, editors and stepfamily researchers Mavis Hetherington, Ph.D., and James Bray, Ph.D., explained it this way: "Although divorce and remarriage may confront families with stresses and adaptive challenges, they also offer opportunities for personal growth and more harmonious, fulfilling family and personal relationships. Contemporary research is focusing on the diversity of responses to divorce, life in a single-parent household, and remarriage."

It is now clear from detailed research that the adaptation to stepfamily relationships depends on the timing of the transition in the children's lives, the individuals involved, and the unique changes and stresses presented to the group.

THE 80 PERCENT WHO SUCCEED

Take Hetherington's research, considered the definitive, longitudinal study of post-divorce families, conducted at the University of Virginia. She found that children in post-divorce and remarriage families may experience depression, conduct disorders, lower academic performance, and delinquency. Such problems are the result of reductions in parental attention that may immediately follow divorce or remarriage. There are the distractions of starting a new marriage. Such lapses may also be the outgrowth of parental conflict. They may reflect a noncustodial parent's withdrawal from the scene altogether. There's the stress of reductions in resources--typically, the lowered income of divorced mothers--and the disruption of routines, so highly valued by children, when two residences are established.

Hetherington, however, is quick to point to her finding that 80 percent of children of divorce and remarriage do not have behavior problems, despite the expectations and challenges, compared to 90 percent of children of first marriage families. Kids whose parents divorce and remarry are not doomed.

This high success rate, Hetherington and others recognize, is a testament to the resilience of children. Further study, she believes, can teach us more about the strengths summoned up in stepfamilies--and how to support them. But that would also contradict the gloom-and-doom scenarios that, though they do not actually describe

most stepfamilies, often get trotted out on state occasions.

Needless to say, scientifically researching strength and resilience in stepfamilies, complete with a control group, poses great challenges. Building a scientific model of stepfamilies isn't simply trying to pin down a moving target, it's like trying to pin down many moving targets--up to four sets of kids from previous marriages in as many residences at different time--with none of them on the same radar screen at once.

From the standpoint of the kids, yes, they feel loss going into a stepfamily--it certifies that their original family exists no more. And it takes time to adjust to a new set of people in family roles. But the new arrangement is not just a problem appearing in their lives by default. Elizabeth Carter, M.S.W., director of the Westchester Family Institute, points to specific opportunities a stepfamily affords. Children acquire multiple role models, they get a chance to see their parents happier with other people than they were with each other. They learn how to be flexible.

Because they come into the world with no relationship ties but must forge their own, stepfamilies provide a living laboratory for studying what makes all families successful, insists psychologist Emily Visher, Ph.D., who cofounded the Stepfamily Association of America in 1979 with her husband, psychiatrist John Visher, M.D., after finding herself in a stepfamily and no rules to go by. For their pioneering efforts, the Vishers jointly received a Lifetime Contribution Award from the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy at its annual meeting last fall.

Addressing an audience packed to the rafters in a mammoth sports arena, Visher emphasized that "stepfamilies provide lessons for all families, because their emotions and problems are common to all people--but they are exposed by the open structure of stepfamilies." The process of bonding and belonging is made entirely, sometimes painfully, visible.

THE COPARENTING FACTOR

It turns out that it's the parents, not the stepfamily, that make the most difference in the success of stepfamilies.

"Remember, divorce isn't ending the family. It is restructuring it," explains Carter. "Parents and children don't get divorced. Parents and children aren't an optional relationship. One of the biggest issues for stepfamilies is: How can we stay in touch?" The steady, regular involvement of both biological parents in their children's lives come what may is known in the family biz as coparenting.

Today's most familiar stepfamily setup is a mother and her biological children living with a man who is not their birth father, and a noncustodial father in another residence--although the dilemmas of maintaining parenting responsibilities are much more complicated than who lives with whom. The U.S. Bureau of the Census reports that 14 percent of children in stepfamilies live with their biological father, 86 percent live with their biological mother and their stepfather. Whatever the situation, the parents' job is to find a way to stay in touch with each other so that both can remain completely in touch with their children.

Study after study shows that divorce and remarriage do not harm children--parental conflict does. That was the conclusion of research psychologists Robert Emery, Ph.D., of the University of Virginia, and Rex Forehand, Ph.D., of the University of Georgia, in a 1993 review of the divorce research. Sociologist Andrew Cherlin, Ph.D., author of the classic Divided Families, reported in Science magazine that children with difficulty after divorce started having problems long before divorce took place, as a result of parental conflict.

While divorce forces temporary disruption and a period of adjustment to loss and to new routines, marital conflict produces long-term disturbances. Depression and anger, often acted out in behavior problems, substance abuse, and delinquency, are all especially common among children in families where conflict rages. Following divorce, adversarial coparenting or the withdrawal of one of the parents from his or her (but usually his) role undermines children's healthy development.

The solution, of course, is cooperation of the parents in coparenting following divorce and remarriage.

Desirable as it is, cooperative parenting between divorced spouses is rare, attained only in a minority of cases, Hetherington and Bray note.

WHY IS COPARENTING SO DIFFICULT?

Most marriages don't end mutually with friendship--so jealousy and animosity are easily aroused--and ex-spouses aren't two folks practiced at getting along anyway. Yet the ability of exes to get along is a key to the success of a new stepfamily.

Remarriage of one or both ex-spouses only enlarges the challenge of getting along--while possibly increasing tension between the ex-spouses responsible for coparenting. A stepparent who becomes a part of the kids' lives usually has no relationship to the child's other biological parent; if anything there is hostility.

The ideal, says John Visher, is creation of a "parenting coalition" among the parents and stepparents in both households. "From the beginning, the new couple needs to work together in making family decisions." One of the most important is how, and by whom, the children will be disciplined, and on that score the evidence is clear: only a birth parent has the authority to discipline his or her children.

Betty Carter is quick to warn, however, that stepparents cannot interfere with their spouse in parenting. Involved but not interfering? A parenting coalition requires the parents include their new spouses in family decisions. The new spouses, for their part, must support the parenting duties and the coparenting bond between the ex-spouses.

IT TAKES RESPECT

The glue that makes it all happen is respect, the Vishers report. Both parents must require kids and stepparents to treat one another with respect. Only then can bonds between them develop. Despite feelings of jealousy and animosity, first and second spouses must also accord one another respect to accomplish the coparenting tasks the children need to do well.

For their part, the kids also need each of the coparents to refer to the other parent with respect. Children are quick to pick up hints of hostility on either side. For them, hostility becomes an invitation to play the grown-ups off each other, and to imitate unkind behavior.

When the parents are adversarial, their hostility inhibits children from freely spending time with both parents, and the kids suffer. They lack the one-on-one attention that breeds a sense of self-value. And they are torn in half. All in all, it's a recipe for disappointment and anger.

ANY HELP?

"If you can help parents and stepparents early on to deal with issues of child-rearing appropriately, they have a lot of potential for giving stability to children and exposing them to appropriately happy relationships," says Australian research psychologist Jan Lawton. Lawton is spoksperson for The Stepfamily Project at the University of Queensland, a major government study of behavioral interventions for stepfamilies with troubled children.

What kind of help do stepfamilies need? Information and support. Stepfamily support groups exist across the United States, many of them organized by the Stepfamily Association. The organization responds to about 400 information requests each week from stepfamilies--while 7,000 new stepfamilies are forming weekly.

Stepfamily functioning improves dramatically when participants know which problems are normal, which are temporary, and that it takes time for people to integrate themselves and feel comfortable in a stepfamily. Lawton's study has demonstrated the benefits of practical guidance, and she has found that even a little help goes a long way. "The positive part of this study is that we can help stepfamilies with a very minimal amount of therapy and self-help, aimed at the right areas." The components of the Queensland program are a map of

stepfamily problem areas.

* Child-Management Training, for parents and stepparents, to help them focus their attention on the children at a time when there's a tendency to slip a little on monitoring and disciplining the kids. The adults often get overly absorbed in their new romance.

* Partner-Support Training for newly remarried couples, since they don't automatically work together as a team during the first two years, when they are also at high risk for divorce. Such support helps them while their relationship is undergoing trial by fire in the new stepfamily.

* Communication and Problem-Solving Training for the entire new stepfamily helps everyone learn to talk together, understand each other, and learn how to solve problems and reach consensus.

Lawton reports as much as a 60 percent reduction in behavior problems and about 50 percent improvement in child adjustment, self-esteem, and parent/stepparent conflict. While therapy had a slight margin over self-help, persons in both groups outperformed by far the control group that received no help during the study. Those with the most troubled children do best with formal therapy; the rest do fine with self-help. Indeed, programs families could apply at home are especially useful, since stepfamilies involve people already weighed down by multiple demands, and coordinating a formal appointment can be formidable.

The key, Lawton says, is to reach stepfamilies at the beginning when they need basic information about what to expect. Lawton's next project is a prevention study, seeking the most effective ways to help all stepfamilies--not just ones where the children have behavior problems.

MORE HELP: A HAPPY MARRIAGE

If coparenting can be accomplished, children benefit in at least two ways. They feel loved by both biological parents; no child can thrive without affectionate connections. And they gain from being exposed to remarried adults in a successful intimate relationship. Especially when remarriage occurs before the children are teenagers, there is great potential for easy adaptation and smooth development.

A remarriage at adolescence, however, poses added challenges to adjustment and success of the stepfamily, Bray and Hetherington report. It's a critical time of identity formation. Daughters are particularly apt to get into fights with stepmothers. Sexual tension may develop between stepfather and a budding adolescent stepdaughter, manifest in aloofness and what every parent knows as snottiness. Even if the divorce occurred many years before, a parent's remarriage during a child's teen years can revive adjustment difficulties that may have cropped up during the divorce.

Generally, though, a successful second marriage helps to reduce--if not eliminate--kids' problems. Divorced people are generally more compatible with their second partner than their first--even though there is a higher divorce rate among second marriages.

Clinical psychology lore has it that the high divorce rate is because the spouses are making the same mistake again. Divorcing spouses have problems with intimate relationships, not with a particular partner, the thinking goes, and they are more apt to bail out a second time.

But this view is totally contradicted by those who have closely scrutinized many stepfamilies. The Vishers are among them. So is University of Southern California sociologist Constance Ahrons, Ph.D. They point out that a lot of second divorces are the result not of conventional marital deterioration but of problems in integrating into a household children and adults who are not related to each other.

"The divorce rate among remarried families is high in the first two year--then it slows down," says Lawton. "By about the five-year period, second relationships are more stable than first relationships. I see these couples at very high risk during the first few years, but thereafter offering great benefits to the children."

LOOKING AT THE PROBLEMS

While stepfamilies are doing a lot better than they're generally given credit for, a not insubstantial 20 percent of them--or twice the number of first-marriage families--do have problems with the kids. The research illuminating the specific problems in stepfamilies points to the basic requirements of stepfamilies as the major stumbling blocks. Cooperative coparenting. Equal involvement of both parents after the divorce. Noninterference by stepparents. Support for the coparenting relationship.

Bray's longitudinal study of stepfamilies has tracked mothers, stepfathers, and children, who were around six years old at the time of remarriage, over the next seven years. During the early months of remarriage, behavior problems rise steeply among the children. This is a time when stepfamilies are not yet cohesive--they are not likely to think of themselves as a unit. Gradually, behavior problems subside over the next two years. By then stepfamilies are just as likely as first-marriage families to have developed useful ways of communicating, rules of behavior, and discipline. They may not consider themselves as cohesive, but objective evaluation finds few practical differences.

In Bray's study, trouble with the children developed when there was a reduction in time and attention from one or both parents, and reduced resources. These parental lapses, Bray notes, arise most often from problems of coparenting, and difficulties of stepparents in supporting the coparenting role.

But even the reduced parental attention does not doom the children. Hetherington observes that the reduced parental attention can also be seen as an opportunity for the children to take on responsibility. The end result is that some children--almost always daughters--wind up more capable and competent.

Others, however, particularly at adolescence, respond to the lapse of parental attention by going off and experimenting with sex or drugs. Younger children may display more conduct problems and depression. Both younger and older kids are at risk for lower academic achievement.

While few distinctions turn up between the ways daughters and sons react to being in a stepfamily, Bray did find increased conflict between stepfathers and stepdaughters at puberty. Hetherington also found difficulties with teenage daughters, and warns that remarriage when a daughter is entering adolescence promises to produce tremendous tension and resentment on the part of the daughter.

Daughters, who have grown close to their mothers and increasingly identify with them at the onset of puberty, will have difficulty with the addition of either a mother's new spouse, who is competition for her, or a father's new spouse--who is competition for her mother. What the girls are feeling is divided loyalty.

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Stepfamilies are littered with possibilities for loyalty conflicts, say the Vishers. A particularly common one revolves around entry of new stepparent. A mom feels hostile toward her ex-husband's new partner; kids understand that their mom wants them to feel the same way. The same kids are also being asked by their dad to love the new wife, whom he loves. The kids feel torn because their parents are pulling them in opposite ways.

It is an axiom of psychology that when kids feel torn, they erupt in symptoms--like bad behavior or depression. It may be a desperate attempt to draw attention away from the unresolvable conflict between the parents. Whatever the source of divided loyalties, once kids feel them, they develop problems--if not behavior problems or depression, then the symptoms of anxiety. The solution? Back to coparenting. It is up to the adults to rise above jealousy or romanticism and work together for the good of the kids.

The respect they use to make the system operate must include appreciation for the inevitability of ambivalent feelings in the kids. And that, says Emily Visher, is one of the most important lessons from stepfamilies for all families. "The ability of adults to share with children ambivalence over loss and change determines how well they will do in the future. It paves the way for sharing other thoughts. It leads to a sense of mastery of whatever

life presents."

One of the sizable traps in remarriage is the temptation a new spouse may feel to interfere with the coparenting process, observes William Doherty, Ph.D., family social scientist at the University of Minnesota. The new spouse may feel insecure or jealous of the coparent's continuing attachment to the former spouse. Still, that only succeeds in dividing the loyalty of the biological parent. A weekly conversation with an ex-spouse about the kids might trouble an anxious new spouse--but the communication is essential and the stepparent has the obligation to adjust, just as the parents do, for the good of the kids.

On the other hand, no stepparent should be expected to love, or even like, a partner's kids, nor must demands be placed on kids to love the stepparent. Loyalty just can't be forced. A strong couple relationship is necessary to the success of the stepfamily, but it cannot hinge on whether the stepparent likes the kids, marital therapists agree. After all, a stepfamily essentially brings together strangers.

THE BASIC NEED: ACCEPTANCE

Stepfamilies can't push members into close relationships; still, they may feel the pain of absence of intimacy. Stepfamily life throws into bold relief very fundamental human needs--above all, says John Visher, the need to be a part of something. Entry into a stepfamily puts members in a position of assessing whether they are an insider or an outsider. A new wife belongs to her new husband, and he to her, but she is not a natural part of the husband's children's life. Feeling like an outsider to their relationship may be upsetting to her.

There's no fast solution for the inside/outside dilemma; stepfamilies come with a big catch in their very structure. The relationship between the parents and children predates the new marital relationship. It may even seem to outweigh it. A parent's love for a child must always be unconditional; couple love is not.

Joan Giacomini, a remarried parent and university administrator in Seattle, warns that it is hard for stepmothers to adjust to the fact that they are not number one to their new spouse. "There may be a handful of number ones, but you aren't the only number one," she says.

That gives rise to an all-too-common scenario: a remarried stepparent--often the stepmother--asks, "who is it going to be, me or your kids?" It's a false question--it leads to what Carter calls a "fake fight"--because it erroneously equates parent-child relationships and marital relationships, apples and oranges. Children are dependents; parental obligations to them are always unconditional.

Because the loyalty challenge rests on a mistaken assumption, Carter says, the proper solution is acceptance that relationships between parent and child are qualitatively different from those between spouses. Still, such conflicts can recur from time to time, as life continually presents new situations that assault the loyalties, resources, and time of kids and spouses.

THE ULTIMATE TRAP

Name a stepfamily dilemma and women--biomothers, stepmothers, even stepdaughters--are at the center of the problem. Psychologists know that women are always more likely to express distress wherever troubles exist. But stepfamilies are the ultimate gender trap. Ever-sensitive to interpersonal problems, women sense problems all over the place in stepfamilies.

Traditional male and female roles are troublesome enough, for the marriage and the children, in first-marriage families. But they wreak havoc on stepfamilies, Carter explains; they don't work at all. Indeed, researchers report that there's more equality in the marriage and in the distribution of domestic tasks in stepfamilies. But they still have a lot to learn--or unlearn--about gender roles and domestic life.

"No matter what we say or how feminist you are, everybody knows that women take care of children and men bring in most of the money. This sucks the stepmother into a quagmire of traditional domestic roles; it's not only that somebody makes her do it, she also does it to herself," explains Carter, coauthor of The Invisible Web:

Gender Patterns in Family Relationships.

"We are raised to believe that we are responsible for everybody. A stepmother sees the children as unhappy and the husband as ineffectual, and she moves in to be helpful. Mavis Hetherington's research shows the consequence of this: a lot of fighting between teenage stepdaughters and stepmothers." Nevertheless, women move toward a problem to work on it--whether it's theirs to work on or not.

Trouble is, explains Carter, "in stepfamilies, everybody has to be in charge of their own children. A biological father has to understand that it is his responsibility to take charge. The stepmother has to back off, let the father do the monitoring and caretaking of the kids--even let him do it wrong. This is very hard to do; it flies in the face of all our gender training."

What's more, a large body of research on depression and marriage demonstrates that women's self-esteem becomes contingent upon relationships going smoothly; it holds in stepfamilies, as well. Women get depressed when stepfamily life goes badly, and they blame themselves.

For all its difficulty, the way parents in stepfamilies devise to take care of their own children contains another lesson for all families. "Stepfamilies demonstrate the importance of one-on-one relationships," says Emily Visher. "Parent-child alone time maintains the security of relationships. It requires conscious planning in all families. The health of all families resides in the quality of the relationships between members."

THE MYTH OF THE HAPPY FAMILY

If stepfamilies make it out of the gender trap, there's one more to avoid--the myth of the nuclear family. Successful stepfamilies let go of their fantasy of a traditional family life, reports James Bray. They become more realistic, less romantic, and more flexible about family. They can cope with what life deals.

But remarriage often sets up conditions pulling the other way. "There's often a sense of defensiveness," explains Betty Carter. "There's a feeling of 'let's not rock the boat this time. Let's be a happy family immediately so we can prove that this complicated thing--the divorce, the new marriage--was the right move.' People try to achieve an instant family, they don't allow for disgruntlement, fear, anxiety. Now we know it takes about five years for a stepfamily to become fully integrated."

Carter advises stepfamilies to "kiss the nuclear family good-bye. Stepfamilies simply cannot draw a tight circle around the household in the same way that nuclear families do. That always excludes somebody." The stepfamily's task is to keep permeable boundaries around the household, to facilitate coparenting, and to allow children access to the noncustodial parent.

It's a lot like tightrope-walking. "At the very time a stepfamily is trying to achieve its own integration, it has to keep the doors wide open and stay in touch with another household. You are not the lord of all you survey, as in the traditional family myth. You are on the phone regularly with someone about whom you feel, at best, ambivalent."

WHAT TO CALL IT?

Perhaps the most concrete evidence that old-fashioned family ideas don't work for stepfamilies is in the labels stepfamilies prefer for themselves.

Some people reject the label "stepfamily" altogether. Joan Giacomini is one. She is divorced from her grown children's father; he is remarried and has a toddler boy. Joan's husband has grown children from his first marriage, too, but she doesn't want to be referred to as a stepmother, nor does she like the idea of someone being referred to as the "stepmother" of her children.

"In our cases, we don't do any mothering. No one else is mother to my children, and my husband's children have their own mother," she explains. "One of my main goals is to respect their first family, so that they can

have their relationships without worry about me." Despite dropping the "step" terminology, Giacomini's various families comprise a successful stepfamily that has respect, shared responsibility, even shared holidays.

Many stepfamilies who start off using step terminology eventually drop it all, reports James Bray. It may be the surest sign of integration. The terms "stepmother" and "stepfather" help clarify roles and remind everybody who belongs to whom, and under what terms, in the transition. Later, though, they don't bother with such names. "Labels connote a struggle for identity that doesn't exist anymore for these groups," says Bray.

For other stepfamilies, such as Ned and Joanna Fox--my mother and her husband--in Charlotte, North Carolina, there is little thought of stepfamily integration. Nobody considers it a stepfamily, nor is anyone a stepsibling or stepparent. The kids were grown when the divorces and remarriages occurred, and none of the kids seem particularly interested in getting involved with the others. While Joanna's children treat Ned like an uncle, and value his love for Joanna, Ned's children don't warm up to the situation.

The moral of the story: Every stepfamily is different.

Some reject not merely the "stepfamily" label but stepfamily roles as well. In fact, the best way for a new spouse to move into stepparent life, suggests Barry Dym, Ph.D., a family psychologist (and remarried father) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, may be to find a different role than that of stepparent. The term itself may force the relationships into an unrealistic, and even intrusive, parental mold.

Dym suggests that stepmothers might do better modeling themselves after a favorite aunt--involved, but not the mother. My favorite aunt provides acceptance, guidance, honesty, but the obligation on either side is voluntary. If I become a stepmother, I think I'll be an aunt.

The naming issue underscores what stepfamilies have that original families don't always get: there is no monolithic view of what a stepfamily is supposed to be, or even be called. To catalog stepfamily experiences would be to catalog all relationships--there is endless variety, and unlimited routes to success or failure. Unlike traditional families, stepfamilies allow much more room for diversity. And equality. Count that as the ultimate lesson from stepfamilies.