

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 040

PS 015 531

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 TITLE Stepfamilies: The Restructuring Process.
 PUB DATE 83
 NOTE 29p.; Document contains small type.
 AVAILABLE FROM Judy Osborne, 353 Walnut St., Brookline, MA 02146
 (\$4.00).
 PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
 DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Restructuring; Conflict; *Conflict
 Resolution; *Emotional Adjustment; Family Counseling;
 Family Environment; *Family Relationship; Fantasy;
 Helping Relationship; *Social Adjustment;
 *Stepfamily

ABSTRACT

Intended primarily for professionals, this booklet describes a process of psychosocial restructuring through which, sometimes with help, members of stepfamilies may assimilate the reality of their new situation. Sections of the discussion focus on phases in the restructuring process: fantasy; pretending; panic; and the emergence of a new family reality involving conflict, re-working, and moving on. Characteristic of the fantasy phase are the 'good' and 'bad' fantasies about the new partnership and the new family. In the pretending phase, stepfamily members pretend to be the collection of fantasies they bring to the new family. Essentially, the panic phase arrives when one or more people in the family begin to recognize their unique, individual view of the family and of other family members and, consequently, start to feel like an outsider. The conflict phase is that time in which the couple and/or family as a whole confront highly charged differences in values, traditions, histories, standards, styles, perceptions, and skills. During the re-working phase conflicts are perceived in new and different ways and members begin to create relationships. Now, moving on, stepfamily members are better able to appreciate and explore the differences within their new family, differences which often become assets. Experience suggests that movement through the process takes at least 4 years. (RH)

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STEPFAMILIES

THE RESTRUCTURING PROCESS

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"We all have a picture
of family. It is not
usually a stepfamily."

JUDY OSBORNE

STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATES

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INTRODUCTION

Each year millions of parents who have been living alone find a new adult partner and form a new relationship. The new couple may be 'just dating' or may decide to live together with a limited or permanent commitment, or decide to marry. In any case these adults create a stepfamily and, willy-nilly, are concerned with steprelationships.

Whatever their form these new relationships have three crucial aspects:

- 1) The adults are at the beginning stages of establishing a sexual relationship and a style of communicating and relating to each other and often cannot get support from each other.
- 2) One or both of the adults is a parent with prior commitments to children and the other adult must respond in some way to his/her parental responsibilities and to the children involved.
- 3) The adults have to become sexual partners and learn how to work at parenting at the same time; a situation which is uncomfortable at best and often explosive for everyone involved.

This paper is for working professionals (teachers, clergy, social workers, doctors, day-care workers) who wish to know more about the process of restructuring the new family, and to know about appropriate support and interventions. It may also be of interest to adults who find themselves in step-relationships and for children, grandparents, aunts, cousins and friends who might want to understand more about the process, confusions, and joys of becoming a stepfamily.

The information is based on personal experience, extensive reading and work done with stepfamilies under the auspices of Stepfamily Associates. Since 1980 Stepfamily Associates has worked with couples, families and professionals from many fields hoping to support people in the early phases of the Restructuring Process.

Based on material and
work jointly prepared

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with special thanks

to

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for editorial assistance

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THE STEPFAMILY RESTRUCTURING PROCESS

Classically the stepfamily is established when a widow or widower with children remarries. The new partner in marriage may or may not have children. But, most importantly, there is a sense of completeness about this new family. The children are full-time, live-in, under-one-roof parts of the family and have, for better or worse, only one male and one female parent to deal with. For adults there is one partner and one set of responsibilities to children on a permanent basis. The dead spouse/parent does not violate the real-world boundaries which grow around the new family. There are no periodic (weekly, monthly, yearly) changes in living arrangements. There are no regular shifts in household arrangements, no built-in interruptions in family life.

However, many of today's stepfamilies are formed out of divorce. The divorced adults increasingly wish to maintain parenting relationships with their children. These children have parents in two different locations and at least one stepparent to relate to. Both adults and children must plan for and deal with constant shifts of people; children leaving and children coming to stay overnight, on weekends, or various parts of vacations. Adults must maintain contact with ex-partners, thus keeping alive memories of the original family and its emotional history. All of the ties are powerful. It is as if nothing can settle down. A constant flow of decisions keeps the old and new ties in curious tension -- decisions about upcoming holidays, reassessment of financial needs, graduation invitations -- and endless list of powerful and draining issues.

Since 1979 much has been written for and about contemporary step-families. The recent literature is almost entirely devoted to stepfamilies formed out of divorce. And, much of it describes the early stages of stepfamily life as the couple begins to date, as the toothbrush is moved into a new holder. The picture that emerges is one of powerful issues between ex-partners, the discipline of adolescent children, custody battles, couples unable to find time to be alone. The picture that emerges is of a group of people -- two adults and children living with or away -- locked in, stuck forever, struggling with ex-s and with each other and the children coming and going in an unstable, sometimes confusing, and usually resentful climate.

The literature however, pays little attention to the fact that, in truth, time brings many changes even though it, of course, cannot heal all wounds.

A far more real picture shows us stepfamilies living together, learning something about each other, gradually developing a shared history and traditions and discovering different ways of looking at and trusting family members. The experiences and stresses in the first year of being together are very different than they will be five years later. Time effects change. Adults and children, confused or angry or depressed in the early phases of coming together as a 'new' family, should know that time will bring changes for them, too. In the first months or years the new family is usually without the perspective to see that their family will grow and change in the immediate years ahead. They cannot get the support from each other in the early years that will be available in years to come.

Professionals have a responsibility to convey that a process is involved when families come together, that issues are faced in

different ways by the same group of people at different times. The family can become a safe, reliable and comfortable place to live. It is not a mysterious process but one that requires information, support and hard work, In working with couples and in presenting workshops to professionals we have identified four phases in the Restructuring Process which 'ring true.'

The diagram below shows the phases. The material which follows will describe the characteristics of each phase and discuss what professionals can do to help at each phase.

THE RESTRUCTURING PROCESS

FANTASY

PRETENDING

PANIC

A NEW FAMILY REALITY

- 1) CONFLICT
- 2) RE-WORKING
- 3) MOVING ON

So let's take a look at the phases of the Restructuring Process.

FANTASY PHASE

Characteristic of the Fantasy Phase are the 'good' and 'bad'

fantasies about the new partnership and the new family. Each adult has fantasies. The children have fantasies.

The adult fantasies are almost always positive. After all, these two people are falling in love.

"I have found the perfect partner, now everything will be all right."

"I will save this poor man/woman who is caring for his/her children alone."

"These children need a mother/father and I will be able to practice being a parent."

"This person will love and nurture my children and we'll be a whole family again."

"We are such a good couple, we can tackle anything together."

"My child needs a sibling."

"I know what went wrong in my first marriage. That won't happen again."

"I'll never be lonely again."

All this can be read as: THINGS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

The children's fantasies are mixed.

"Now I'll have a mommy/daddy."

"Now my mom/dad will be happy."

"I'll never see my mom/dad again."

All this can be read as : THINGS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

Older children or children who are already adult have more negative fantasies.

"My stepparent will be too strict."

"I won't have any time with my parent."

"I will lose my inheritance to stepparent or to stepsiblings."

Again to be read as: THINGS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

For the adult the Fantasy Phase is the time of falling in love, of planning for a new future, of excitedly sharing those plans. They wish for and invest in a new beginning. As anyone who has ever been in love knows, this phase can last a few days or a few months. The real experiences of living together in a new family tend to move us out of this phase. But, it is a definable, identifiable and inevitable phase for both adults and children.

Professionals can help during this phase by encouraging everyone in the new family to enjoy the pleasant fantasies and to articulate and elaborate all fantasies. Finding words for these fantasies will help prepare families to struggle with the realities of later phases. They will be able to understand more about the differences between wishes and needs if they have really looked at the wishes.

Couples and families well past the Fantasy Phase report that while they were caught up in fantasies they did notice many characteristics of their partners or the children that were at odds with the fantasy. Perhaps a child, seeing a new stepfather as too strict, also notices he likes to talk about sports. In the Fantasy Phase the child will almost always talk about the strictness and ignore the very thing that is likely to be a foundation of a later relationship. Likewise couples falling in love tend to dismiss annoying personal characteristics as unimportant. To admit complex reality when one is falling in love is too demanding. Reality is more work -- but ultimately it is more fun.

Sadly, a new family founded when children are fifteen or older often leaves the children little or no time to live through their fantasies. They have too little time to find a place for themselves in the new family and to create a real relationship with the stepparent

In the Fantasy Phase the family members with positive fantasies feel like 'insiders.' Those with negative fantasies feel like 'outsiders.' Usually both are wrong. It helps to encourage family members to talk about their fantasies -- individually, as a couple, or as a family -- and encourage everyone to really enjoy the positive fantasies.

PRETENDING PHASE

Pretending to be the collection of fantasies the adults and children bring to the new family is the characteristic of this phase.

Pretending to have no 'unacceptable feelings' couples pass over the angers they feel. They may be afraid to notice anger -- it may feel like the path to divorce. Or it may be a life-long pattern to have no unacceptable feelings. In this phase children and adults ignore or don't even recognize the powerful positive and negative feelings they have toward one another. Usually each individual develops a position in the new family -- on the inside, the outside or in the middle, holding all together. An adolescent may pretend to have no warm feelings for the stepparent even though these feelings do well up. Women who have never had children usually go overboard -- ignoring their own needs and the realities of being a stepparent, trying to be and/or pretending to be the perfect mother.

There is pretending to have no needs that will conflict with the way the new family seems to be functioning: Everyone must do everything together. There is pretending that nothing (or everything) has changed. Children are prone to this. A parent has found a new partner but the old parent-child relationship will stay the same, or, conversely, children see that everything has changed

and they pretend that they don't need anybody.

People in the family tend to be at one of two different places -- either the family doesn't exist at all or they are living in a 'normal' family.

It is quite easy for some new stepfamilies to look like a 'normal' family. There are two adults and children. That looks like a family. Or, there are two adults living together. That's a family too. Onlookers do not see the shadows of ex-partners or visiting children or the separation/custody arrangements that can be a tortured part of their family history and daily lives. Many people move when they recouple. Then there is an even greater likelihood that neighbors, schools, churches/temples and other community insitutions will see them as a 'normal' couple or family. Unwittingly, society is unsupportive.

Professionals can help couples and families in this phase by talking about the realities of stepfamilies. Schools and religious institutions can help by making brochures and books available. Forms can be changed to allow new families to show the presence of stepparents and stepchildren. Workshops for adults and children and even for extended family help everyone see stepfamily living as normal, yet with real differences and identifiable stresses.

Permission needs to be given that allows feelings to be felt without shame and allows families to begin to identify the needs of each member. People who have experienced divorce often avoid negative feelings or owning needs which might cause conflict. They sense that they could 'rock the boat' and choose, rather, to pull back from conflict.

Many families get stuck in the Pretending Phase and remain stuck

there for many years. They may know no other way. Facing the individual needs and feelings of family members may be too frightening. As individuals, they have not learned how to manage ambiguity and complexity early in their lives and they simply do not yet have the skills to bring to this complicated new family form.

It is important for those professionals who themselves live in stepfamilies to take the lead in speaking up about the realities of stepfamily living. No one needs to live in a Pretend family. Everyone needs support and help in making their family safe and reliable.

PANIC PHASE

Passing from the earlier phases of Fantasy and Pretending to the Panic Phases is usually very difficult for everyone in the family. On the diagram (page 3) you will notice a double line setting off Panic from the other phases. It is difficult for anyone to face feelings of panic. There is an added difficulty if you have already had a loss and remember the panic associated with it.

Essentially the Panic Phase arrives when one or more people in the family begin to recognize and own their view of the family and of other family members. Their emerging needs may be needs for closeness or for separateness. They realize that they may have made painful compromises within this new family. They do not want to 'rock the boat' and yet do not want to keep compromising real needs and ways of seeing. Those dear little children of your new-found love, that you desperately wanted to mother, may now appear as whiney and spoiled. Do you say that? Your view of a child is one way if you are a parent, different if you are a stepparent. Which, if either, is true? The question in this phase is. How does a couple and then the whole family handle difference? How do they admit the differences

and yet not fly apart into separate camps or lonely places?

Characteristic of this phase is that one feels like an outsider in the family.

Many adults are desperate to make a second partnership work and are desperately afraid to get into conflicts again. Another broken relationship will bring further loss to adults and children. Conflict means divorce to many. Anticipating conflict means some level of panic for all of us.

This phase -- Panic -- is the time when one remembers what one saw, but dismissed, during the Fantasy Phase.

"Perhaps I don't want to rescue any child."

"Maybe I don't like her children. Do I admit it?"

"Maybe the ex-spouse was right to leave."

"I don't want to spend every weekend or all summer with children. When do we have some time alone"

"When do I have some time alone."

"I want my new baby without these other children."

This phase can be exhilarating, painful and frightening. It is a time when one begins to reown one's needs and wishes. Someone, or everyone, blows up. The cover or mask of the family is blown away. One is oppressed with the situation, the form of the family, and the personalities. There is a certain clarity that something different needs to happen, but what? Panic. One begins to sense one's own needs -- not the fantasy needs of the family. "Dare I meet my own needs -- for order, privacy, etc?" One notices that there is a fine line between compromise and capitulation and somehow it always feels like capitulation. Fighting over kids will surely end in divorce. Panic. It can fairly be said that most adults in stepfamilies either feel outside the family or always in the middle during this phase.

This is the danger-point for the new relationship. This is where splits occur. The couple, panicky about their own differences in the relationship, often focus on fighting over the kids. And, this is where people settle for less than is possible. This is where the Restructuring Process can come to a premature halt. To face the panic, to go on to express it, and to learn to deal with conflict is what is required. Many people would rather not, or have not yet learned how to face their feelings and needs. Abandonment or loss of one's self are seen as the only possible outcomes to panic.

Ideally this is the phase where people seek out help. In fact many do seek help at this point and professionals need to be most sensitive to the family members as individuals. Each member of the family, especially the adult couple unit, needs support and an opportunity to vent and clarify some raw and painful feelings and fears. Professionals who have had no experience with stepfamilies may see the family in this phase as a family in very serious trouble. There may be trouble, but probably far less than appears. It is surely a time for sorting out what is trouble from what is inexperience with each other. Is it a problem-family or just a family problem? My experience suggests that professionals and families themselves tend to see 'problem family' more than is necessary. The family needs to gain distance and to get support while time passes.

It is important at this point for professionals to support the couple, to give them the permission to focus on each other and to rebuild the boundaries between the generations so that the couple unit has time to grow. This can be a time to help the couple to see their rights to put limits on what children and ex-partners demand and to help them to hold on so that time can help build what is potentially a strong couple bond.

The step family at this point is a group of people who have not been together long enough to face anything positively or competently. They need support from competent helpers who can allow time to help, can help the couple and family learn and know that they do not have to face the panic alone; that there are different ways to do business and that they will all feel stronger as time gives them a shared history. These stepfamilies reaching for help in a time of panic do not need helpers who try to settle issues, they need helpers who understand process.

The workshops and groups which form the content of Stepfamily Associates are helpful as the adults face this panic of differentiation and individuation in their new family. Some information and a chance to talk to others in a similar situation can give the couple a saving distance and a new perspective on each other and the children. There are no rules and no models for how one should put a new family together and there is always panic at having to fashion something new -- to shape a unique family which tries to meet unique needs.

A NEW FAMILY REALITY

To face the panic is the way to get into the middle of the Restructuring Process. The open door at the other end is framed by giving boundaries to the areas of conflict and developing ways to address differences in new and more constructive ways for everyone in the family. The diagram for this last phase (page 3) has no neat demarkation between the parts. The couple, or whole family unit, begins to:

- 1) frame the areas of conflict,
- 2) go on to rework the conflict -- frame the conflict and questions in light of the realities they feel and face, and

3) move on to accept their losses and gains.

It has been our experience that couples or families who go through this process once tend to face other issues in the same way. The family comes up with a distinctive way to solve problems.

There is nothing new about this process. It is not a new invention. It is a way that people, couples and families create safe, comfortable and reliable places to live. What is new, perhaps, is that more people -- in this case stepfamilies -- with supportive help are experiencing this process and are making it a part of their lives. Work with stepfamilies requires no new techniques or therapies. What seems to be important is helping stepfamilies to be strong enough to get to these final parts of the Restructuring Process. Assessing the couple and children in light of the Restructuring Process helps to ensure that the family can move on.

A NEW FAMILY REALITY: CONFLICT

The Conflict Phases is that time in which the couple and/or family as a whole confront highly charged differences in values, traditions, histories, standards, styles, perceptions and skills. The task is to clarify the needs of each person and to get some limits or boundaries around the issues causing conflict. One needs to spend time clarifying each person's needs, underscoring the realities of the different aspects of this new family (couple, children of various ages and custody arrangements and ex partners). There are conflicts between the adults, between an adult and one child or stepchild, between the couple and the whole group of children, with ex-partner; between child and parent, between children who live in and those who visit. Sorting out and identifying where the conflicts are helps to reduce the panic and to bring into proportion the conflict

itself. There is a tendency for the conflicts to be highly invested and hugely exaggerated in this phase. By sorting, the couple and family learns more about its uniqueness. Defining the conflict as manageable increases the chances of settling the conflict and so builds trust and confidence in this new family about their ability to handle differences. There are no right answers and no standard models for effective stepfamily living.

This is the phase when old and new alliances shift from moment to moment as everyone begins to look at realities of living arrangements and individual needs. Does the adult seek support from new ties to partner or old ties to children? When stepparent and child interact (positively or negatively) what does the parent do? Bite tongue or wade in? When there is a question about a child's behavior at school does it come up in the new family? or is it discussed between the original parents? or in an uncomfortable joint meeting? Where do children accept direction and discipline -- from parent or stepparent? This phase is usually the time in which stepparent and child have their first direct contact, their first time together seeing that they can bear the tension of a period of time alone or involved in a mutually satisfying activity. Here occur the first experiences, however brief, that they may be able to bear the tension of real feelings between them and that they can have a relationship together. There is no requirement that they either hate or love each other, stepparent and stepchild must simply make space for one another.

Professionals give support by helping sort out the conflicts and by reinforcing the notion that the only requirement is that enough space be created for each member of the family. They, themselves, must negotiate real relationships and revise couple and family boundaries.

A NEW FAMILY REALITY: RE-WORKING

The Re-Working Phase is that time when the conflicts get looked at in new and different ways. All parts of the family begin to sense the new boundaries. Children sense a stronger couple unit and the changing ties between their original parents. Adults begin to feel stronger together with less jealousy and disruption possible from ex-partners. Stepparent and stepchild begin to see that they are under no injunction to love or to hate. They begin to create a relationship.

Children still have much to work out in terms of loyalty issues. But, at this point the family feels itself on a firmer foundation and able to withstand the tests of conflict. The aftershocks of death or separation and/or divorce are subsiding. The new family members can go on with their own developmental needs, appropriate to their age. Of course, one must realize that children whose parents have split are vulnerable to feeling the torn places again and again. There is always the powerful wish to reunite their parents, to make 'it' right. They feel they are both the cause and the cure of the separation and are powerful enough to bring them back together, if only they know how. They always wish to be the glue to return their parents to one another and to the original family.

In this phase the people in the family begin to feel more like insiders. They no longer must pretend to be on the inside. The couple feels more like a team relative to children. Their partnership with each other has become stronger than the relationship to ex-partners. Child and stepparent evolve a relationship in which the stepparent is seen primarily as parent's spouse, perhaps a model or a teacher, not as a substitute parent. The relationship is created honestly out of experience rather than out of fantasied expectations. The relationship between child and stepparent becomes

sanctioned by one and, hopefully, both original parents. Relationships in the whole family become fuller, catching up 'good' and 'bad' feelings in a more realistic whole.

For professionals it is important, in this phase, to spell out to couples and families that they will feel these shifts and to predict the more positive feelings and greater wholeness that will be emerging. The couple or family can then notice these shifts as they are happening and begin to relish these more positive aspects of their new family.

A brief aside seems necessary here. Little attention has been paid to the role of the ex-partner/original parent in the Restructuring Process of the new stepfamily. Characteristically the 'other' is seen as the 'bad' one, the disruptive one. And often that is the case. But, more and more one finds the 'other parent' busily engaged in forming yet another new stepfamily, learning the stresses and strains first hand. With regard to children finding their place in each of their new families it is imperative for both parents of that child to give permission to their child - permission to enter relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings - permission to learn to be part of two families. Parents can support their children's own timing for these moves but the tasks of restructuring will be accomplished more swiftly if this permission is felt by the children.

Whether hostile or friendly at the time of the separation the relationship between ex-partners moves from that of ex-sexual partners to that of co-parents. It is often important for professionals to make this explicit, to help the ex-partners to work on this movement from the sexual tensions of the original partnership to the tensions of co-parenting.

It is often hard for a parent to feel genuine and easy about supporting a child's growing relationship with a stepparent of the same sex. Depending on history it may stick in a father's throat to say, "I'll bet some day you'll find that your stepfather will be important to you." Or, for a mother to say, "It's okay to tell your stepmother when you feel lonely or upset." For both parents it may be hard to let their children know that they can work toward loving their stepparent. But, it is a very important element for children's feelings of safety and resolution. And, it is essential to the final phases of stepfamily restructuring.

In this phase professionals can help the family to appreciate the compromises that must be made. Many, many difficult compromises are worked out during the Re-Working Phase. The compromises usually have to do with parent-child, stepparent-child or new couple-expartner relationships. A parent engaged in a struggle with an ex-partner who is using the children as pawns may decide not to see the children. The professional may, at first glance, see that parent as uncaring, more focused on new family than on older and more expected parental ties. If professionals have not lived through the Stepfamily Restructuring Process themselves, and have not yet had opportunities to learn about stepfamilies, it is difficult to appreciate and support these compromises. Our own unconscious biases and feelings bubble to the surface and are communicated as disapproval. We all have a picture of family. It is not usually a stepfamily.

It is often difficult for people inexperienced in stepfamily living to appreciate the numbers of people who must be accommodated in a single, seemingly simple, decision. For example, take the decisions around a holiday such as Thanksgiving. Where do children go for the day? Do they split the day between parents' homes? Not if parents live far apart. Who pays for travel? If both adults in the

stepfamily have children how does one work out simple arrangements with two ex-partners who may also have new partners, with children? In the endless possible chain it is no wonder that unilateral decisions are made, decisions which anger everyone. And, that's just adult negotiation, presumably adults who are behaving like adults. To that we add the wishes and whims of children of various ages -- "But, I don't want to go..." "I want to go with my friends."

A stepfamily is rather akin to a game of chess -- each piece has a different move, and it's hard to learn the moves. It's a wonder the turkey ever gets served. Professionals ought to cheer when anything goes right in these middle stages of the Restructuring Process. Everyone is usually trying as hard as they can to do what seems right. And, they are trying to learn new ways to communicate their plans and wishes.

A NEW FAMILY REALITY: MOVING ON

In this last phase of the Restructuring Process -- Moving On -- the couple and the family are better able to appreciate and explore the differences within their new family. These differences often become assets. The family can appreciate the positive aspects of their relationships, see the issues they have wrestled with and have already settled, and look for the positive short and long-range gains they may have made as a new family.

There is now a clear awareness that steprelationships are different than the original parent-child relationship (whether biological or adoptive). Everyone has calmed down about trying to love everyone equally -- or at all. Relationships, based on true affinity, now have a chance to grow and flourish. The fracture in the life cycle

that is caused by divorce, death or desertion now has a chance to heal. Like a fractured bone it may well heal in an even stronger way.

There is a realization, acceptance and effort to live with the reality that, however constituted, the children have two families and will always have two families.

There remain many unresolved issues in the family but they are seen more clearly. It is more acceptable that some issues are unresolved. To have a new baby, to work toward custody changes, to make work or geographical changes are some of the typical unresolved issues.

Characteristic of this phase is the sense that issues can be dealt with on their own. The couple or family seems to have a sense that issues can be tackled one at a time. There is no longer the cascade or flood of issues that overwhelm and engulf, the fear that the family will fly apart. There is a tolerance of resolution. Many people who have been through the turmoil of death, divorce, desertion and single parenting find it very difficult to tolerate resolution of issues.

It is here in the Moving On Phase that, rather than anger, the characteristic feeling tone is sadness. The sadness and grief of what their family is, and is not.

Stepfamilies are just not the way we are taught to see families. For a woman without children there will never be the experience of bringing her first baby home to a new nest. Babysitters are already living in or visiting. A man who marries a woman with children may never experience natural fatherhood. These losses must be grieved. Children consciously or unconsciously begin to settle the realities of their parents' separation and the new adult relationships. But, one must always keep in mind that whatever their ages and whatever

the course of their parents' lives, children always wish for reunion, for the wholeness of the original family, together again. Children must grieve, in whatever way they can, the reality of their parents' new relationships.

In essence then, the last phase of the Restructuring Process finds adults and children discovering within the new family the possibilities of it being a safe, reliable, lifetime connection for everyone. They can look at the positive aspects of this family. There are many real pleasures as well as sadnesses.

As for the pleasure. The couple and the family as a whole begin to get a return on their investment. They can appreciate and learn some of the following:

- * Everyone learns a lot about negotiation and compromise while living in a stepfamily.
- * Everyone learns a lot about ambivalent feelings for partner, ex-partner, children and stepchildren.
- * Everyone learns that 'letting go' of children and parents is an issue faced and experienced far earlier in stepfamilies than in traditional families; dealing with separations slowly and carefully is always a plus.
- * Relationships are unique and precious; they are created not demanded.
- * Children have an opportunity to experience many more models of adult behavior from which, later, to choose.
- * Everyone has a chance to renew their faith in close personal relationships between adults.

IN CONCLUSION

There seems to be a consensus that the time needed to move through the Restructuring Process is four years at the very least. It seems to take the classic two years for the couple-unit to feel safe

enough for the adults to allow themselves to confront the conflict and the re-working of the larger family issues. It seems to make some sense that at least two years, for the couple, and then two more years, for the family as a whole, are required simply to store up enough shared history to be able to feel trust and safety with these 'new' people. That time allows the couple to feel more connected with each other than with their children or their ex-partners.

The adults could decide to join in a legal relationship at any phase. Marriage itself seems neither to hinder or advance the Restructuring Process. One critical issue around marriage is the importance of informing children about the marriage well before it occurs. There are tales of life-long resentments because a child was informed the day of or after the wedding. It seems terribly important for children to anticipate the event, to incorporate the change and, if possible, to be witnesses.

Although marriage does not seem to hinder or accelerate the Restructuring Process certainly it is an important and powerful event in the family's life. Many couples report dramatically changed behavior on the part of a child or all the children after the ceremony. Some children feel more strongly the loyalty conflict after a remarriage. For other children things begin to settle down. The marriage may signal the new order.

There are two types of stepfamilies: 1) one in which only one partner is a parent, and 2) one in which both partners are parents. Each type has a specific danger spot. In the first type it is most difficult for the adult who is not a parent to break into the parent-child relationship: to become a member of the family. It is difficult to become a parent in-front-of someone more experienced. Parent and non-parent seem to have a difficult time appreciating each

other's position. The parent tends to 'jump in' to protect a child. The parent will judge the stepparents' parenting style in its formative stage. Or the parent will simply hover, leaving no room for the stepparent. The specific danger in this stepfamily is that the adult couple will develop a relationship but that the non-parent will forever be an outsider to any larger family connection.

The danger for the stepfamily in which both adults are parents seems to be in polarization and competition as parents. Who can be the better parent? The original parent-child units give a good deal of support; enough support so that the new adult partnership does not get firmly established. There is a sense that the adults 'parallel play' at being parents and do not move through the Restructuring Process to form a strong adult sexual union.

All of the foregoing, the movement through the Restructuring Process is, of course, a relatively ideal picture. We have found that each member of the family -- or each of the adults -- may be at very different stages at any one time. Quite often one partner will be in the Fantasy or Pretending Phases while the other partner is simmering and/or terrified in the Panic Phase. One is willing to reach out for help and support, the other still looking past all the differences in the family.

Children are often at different phases. It helps to keep in mind that the novelty of the family's coming together may be of interest to children and teens but their focus often remains on the original split and, because of the new people and new ties, their disruptive relationships with both natural parents.

The Restructuring Phases can be used effectively as an assessment tool to help the family see themselves in a process. The Restruc-

turing Phases can help professionals assess the appropriate support for any given couple or family.

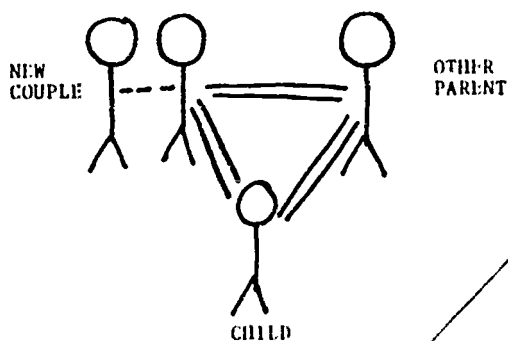
- * An individual in the early stages may need individual support to give words to needs and painful feelings.
- * During the middle phases couple and whole-family treatment is most appropriate. Giving individual support to a partner in the conflict phase may serve to further polarize the relationship.
- * The grief and loss of family ideals which are powerful in the late phases may call for individual support again.

The shifting ties which are a part of the Restructuring Process are described below:

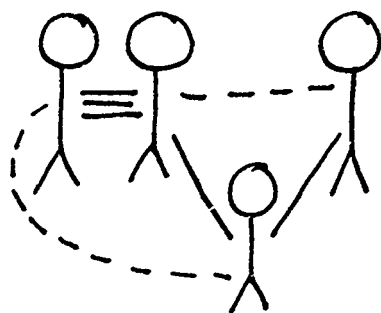
- EARLY PHASES --- The original parent-child unit predominates.
- The couple unit is weak.
- Ties to ex-partner are strong and are either hostile or friendly.
-
- LATE PHASES --- The couple bond has become safe and reliable.
- The couple, as a parenting team, has recreated the generational boundaries.
- The child-stepparent relationship is in the process of developing; its form is usually that of teacher of model.
- Ex-partner sexual bonds become dormant; co-parenting relationship becomes clearer.

The shifting ties can also be illustrated:

EARLY PHASES



LATE PHASES



Change is the only sure theme in any family. It is often more clearly seen in the stepfamily. A dramatic change for any couple or family is the birth of a baby. For the stepfamily, past the Panic Phase, the new baby offers the opportunity for the family to be truly related as kin. Real relationships continue to grow and deepen but the power of the kinship ties ought not to be ignored.

As the ties and sense of belonging change family members feel alternately inside -- outside -- or unhappily, in the middle -- of the movement. Each position can be a relief or a torture. For professionals to be sensitive to each person, to get their sense

of what the family feels like and means to each and to help family members remember to take time. That constitutes support.

We have presented a general picture, a picture which helps shed light on a new family form and on how to support, encourage and help individuals, couples and families. We hope it helps to put the assessment of stepfamilies into a framework of movement rather than being forever captured in one frame -- to view it as a movie rather than a photograph. And, we hope it helps to put the isolated stepfamily back into the movement of growth and change that we all experience as we develop throughout our lives.

* * * * *

"The stepfamily reaching for help in a time of panic does not need helpers who try to settle issues. They need helpers who understand process."

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