

## From Cinderella to Marcia Brady - Navigating the Step Family Terrain

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Families post separation face challenges and pitfalls such as coalitions, alliances and relationships that compete for attention and affection. Therapy that provides choices and information can ensure a smoother and more fulfilling outcome for these families.

Remember the *The Brady Bunch*, the American Sitcom that aired on our television screens in the 1970's? The series is the story about a large blended family of 6 children whose parents Mike and Carol Brady have three children each and come to live together under the one roof. Remember the roles they each played - Marcia the eldest daughter was often the source of jealousy from her younger sister Jan who was in the middle position. She acted as second in command with her older brother Greg. Peter was seen as clumsy, Bobby was clever and often over-looked, Cindy was portrayed as naive and slightly precocious with corkscrew ponytails. There was Alice the live in maid who had a dry sense of humour and added some lightness to the situation.

Cast your mind back to your childhood where step mothers featured in literature and fairy tales such as Cinderella, Snow White and Hansel and Gretel. They often contained a wicked step mother - a cruel character who tends to focus on the step daughter as her victim. In fact, Cinderella was named because of her role of having to start the fire every morning for her step mother and two step sisters who were all jealous of her beauty. Of course she ends up with the prince after the step sisters had been vying for his affection. Again, Snow White, finds her jealous step mother the Evil Queen is out to kill her.



Interestingly *The Gold Bearded Man* and

the The Little Bull Calf are two rare examples of stepfathers in fairy tales. It is thought that step fathers appeared less commonly because historically many women died in childbirth and their husbands remarried, the new stepmothers competed with the children of the first marriage.

The topic of step families has been written about for centuries whether in fairy tales or on the screen. There is also a wide body of research that illustrates important aspects of this field. The Virginia longitudinal study was one of the most comprehensive studies carried out on this topic, conducted by E Mavis Hetherington (2002), Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Psychology, University of Virginia. The study began in 1972 and spanned 20 years incorporating the changing landscape of families post divorce and re-marriage. More recent work by Patricia Papernow (2017) discusses major challenges the step family structure creates and ways to manage this.

In 2016 in Australia 6.4% of families were considered step families and 3.7% were blended families. A step family exists where one parent is not biologically related to the child. A blended family exists when both repartnered parents go on to have a biological child between them and live together. by <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/family-blending>.

## **Major challenges facing step families and obstacles to consider.**

### **Insider/outsider positions**

In a nuclear family the outsider/insider positions tend to rotate - with one parent often being more popular one day/week and the other the next. In a step family the non biological parent is always in the outsider position. Despite parents not wanting to exclude the step parent, they are hard wired to turn to their children thus inadvertently leaving the step parent feeling lonely and abandoned. Likewise struggling to meet this balance can leave the biological parent feeling inadequate and anxious.

The “family architecture”, the established connection that exists with the biological parent, is challenged in step families. The nuclear family have had time to develop trust, attachment and rituals that a child is brought into. There is a shared understanding of how things are done. A new parent or child entering into this system must then attempt to enter this group which can pose significant challenges. Papernow (2017)

### **Loss and loyalty**

The process of a parent finding a new partner can represent loss for a child as they let go of the idea of their parents being together. In addition the challenge of developing a relationship with the new partner creates a feeling of disloyalty to the biological parent.

### **Parenting style**

Being able to manage an authoritative style of parenting that involves a combination of warmth and love with age appropriate limits and boundaries. It is however commonly a problem that step parents seek more limits and biological parents seek more caring and understanding resulting in a pull into opposite directions.

### **New culture and rituals among established norms**

Stepfamilies need to set up new rules and rituals around dinner, homework, holidays and other family events. Celebrations such as Christmas and Easter can take on a greater need for negotiation where differences need to be accommodated particularly if there is a religious or symbolic component.

“It is not the family structure that primarily determines wellbeing. It is the process... massive amounts of research establish the toxic impact of conflict on children. Indeed adult children with low conflict divorced parents fared better than children with never divorced high conflict parents” (Papernow 2017: 16).

### **Other parents outside the household are part of a step family**

The extended family are a part of the step family including the ex-spouses, step siblings, step grandparents and half siblings. *How* the family communicate and manage differences and tensions will be more important than *Who* is in the family.

## **Strategies for helping step families navigate changes.**

### **Manage Timing and Pace of Change**

According to Hetherington's research, remarriage is more likely to be successful roughly before children are under the age of 10 or after age 15. Children are less likely to be resistant at this age as young children are more likely to become emotionally attached and older adolescents are relieved that the parent has support as they prepare for more independence and autonomy.

Research by Jeynes (2007) points out that when the pace of change goes up children's well-being goes down.

The pace of change is also important to monitor, balancing the eagerness of new step couples to establish a new life together. Encouraging step parents to show verbal affection rather than physical affection, speaking in positive terms about the ex-partner and adopting a friend relationship rather than being a disciplinarian until a solid bond is established seem to be helpful strategies.

### **Consider Parenting Style and Communication skills**

Hetherington (2002) discusses the importance of step parents earning the respect and trust of the child before they attempt to discipline. A step parent may prevent a child feeling resentful or controlled if they focus on providing support around discipline and establish a friendship with the child. An authoritative parenting style as opposed to authoritarian or laissez-faire style will also reduce conflict and tension.

Encouraging collaborative parenting as a way of handling differences as opposed to insisting on agreement between households is also imperative. For example - accepting there may be differences in routines, meals, clothing, and rules at each parents house.

Supporting and teaching effective communication skills including using positive language with their partner, minimising criticism and contempt and maintaining positive language about the partner with the child will also improve outcomes.

### **Encourage emotional literacy in family members**

Helping adults to use language around "parts" with children, for example, helping understand the part of them that is angry and confused at mum/dad leaving and the part of them that still loves them. It is also helpful to encourage parents to empathise rather than explain or correct. Internal Family Systems theory can be a useful adjunct with these ideas (see <https://ifs-institute.com/resources/articles/internal-family-systems-model-outline>).

Encouraging discussion amongst family members about what has been most difficult, for example "what do you most want your father/mother to know about what has been hardest for you about this new family". Encouraging parents to avoid trying to fix things when a child is distressed and instead deepen understanding eg "I can see its really hard to see your daughter upset".. "what's happening inside for you".

### **Maintain routines and structure and involvement from both parents.**

Often this is not the time to change activities, mealtimes/bed times or other physical areas such as furniture and belongings. Familiarity brings comfort during times of stress. Facilitating the non-resident parent to maintain involvement is also important. It is well researched in attachment theory the need to affirm and involve both parents in the arrangements where possible. Father/daughter relationships are particularly vulnerable after a separation and can benefit from encouragement to participate in children's activities where appropriate.

### **Work with subsystems.**

Before meeting with the parents and child, it may be useful to meet with the step couple to build engagement with the step parent. This may involve education around challenges facing children at this time and to encourage empathic attunement. Therapy can also help parents understand the pain of the step parent being in the outside position.

In conclusion, life may not resemble the Brady Bunch for most families post divorce or death of a parent. Identifying obstacles, providing education and strategies to help families navigate these changes is imperative for a better outcome for children and parents alike.

### **References**

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