

STEPPARENT NEWSLETTER

April/May '07



home & family

inspiring families



Article from the Sunday Star Times March 11 '07

The days of the nuclear family have gone. Ruth Hill discovers how modern multi-parent households are coping with their kids and those they take on.

Having a step mum or step dad is a reality for 40% of Kiwi kids, yet little is known about what makes stepfamilies work or fail.

PhD student Rebecca Graham, from Victoria University's Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families, is exploring why some step-families prove more durable than others.

She says children have an "incredibly powerful" influence on how well step-families function.

But many of the biggest problems seem to occur in adult-to-adult relationships, especially over the "ex-factor".

"Many people find it very threatening to have someone else parent their child," Graham says. "Research such as this is crucial if we are to understand what factors promote more resilient step-families, so that we can provide useful information to families in similar situations."

The classic nuclear family set-up of mum, dad and 2.5 kids has been replaced in many cases with mum, her new partner and their baby;

while dad has his wife and her two kids from a previous relationship or end-less other possible combinations.

The number of instances in which one or both partners were previously married has grown from about one in six marriages in 1971 to roughly a third of all marriages registered in 2005.

Of these, about 45% involved people with children aged 17 or younger.

Christchurch family therapist Don Rowlands says the idea of creating "an instant family" is a myth.

"It often takes time for a step-family to rebuild - that's why I like the word 'step', which shows there's a stepping stage rather than just blending and losing the original family. It's a way of acknowledging the history and the grief when beginning the steps towards rebuilding."

The sobering figures on family breakdowns hint at the difficulties: only two out of five step-families make it beyond five years.

For the last six years, Christchurch's Home and Family Centre has run the Step-Family Support Group, a forum for parents to discuss their problems and anxieties.

This helps "normalise" their experiences and gives them a chance to learn about strategies that have worked for others.

Rowlands says part of the problem is the lack of recognition for step-parents, both socially and institutionally.

Step-families are often under huge financial pressure, with some parents surviving on minimal child support payments, and others responsible for supporting two households and paying transport costs for access visits.



Next Stepparent Meeting Tues, April 3, 7.30pm

@ Home & Family,
221 Manchester St
ph 379 5645

Family Counsellor,
Don Rowlands
will facilitate
a discussion
about
"Stepfamily
Realities"

May Stepparent Meeting Tuesday May 1, 7.30pm @ Home & Family

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"The role is not valued," Rowlands says. "We only hear about the abusive stepfathers, we never see newspaper photos of people building families out of chaos, providing a secure base for children, financially bringing up someone else's child, often with no thanks from the child!"

Co-facilitator Wendy Duder says many adults find it hard to separate their own relationship difficulties from their parenting.

"It's awful to see children being used in emotional blackmail.

"Sometimes the parents are going through such huge grief; they don't see what they are doing to their own children."

- Step families interested in taking part in the research project are urged to get in touch with Rebecca Graham (Rebecca.Graham@vuw.ac.nz). She is particularly interested in talking to families who have been together for less than three years and have children between the ages of seven and 11.

A broken relationship creates a double life



Warring separated parents are forcing a six-year-old Christchurch girl to live a double life.

Her father's new partner was not allowed to meet her for almost a year into their relationship because his ex-wife vetoed it.

Five steps to success

Strategies for building a successful step family.



1. **"Step by step"** is the best approach, says researcher Rebecca Graham. "When parents talk to the children about this new person in their life and introduce them slowly, that seems to work best. The children feel like their opinion matters."
2. **Talk to each other** about who should be responsible for what: "Usually something is said after the step parent has overstepped the mark in the eyes of the biological parent."
3. **Set rules.** An agreed set of house rules usually plastered up on the fridge is an important starting point for step families negotiating their roles, particularly when bringing together two or more sets of children under the same roof.
4. **Discipline is the biggest source of conflict** but more for the adults involved. "Interestingly, the children didn't seem to have a problem with being disciplined by a step parent. It was more a problem for the biological parent if they felt the step parent had overstepped the mark."

The new stepmother explains: "It was very difficult because she was staying with him quite a lot at that stage, which meant I couldn't see him either."

Surprisingly, when they were finally allowed to meet, "it was very easy".

"Her mother had told her I was 'the reason daddy wasn't coming home', but she had no problem at all, just latched on straight away.

"Five is an easy age compared with taking on teenagers."

Sadly, communication between the adults remains problematic, which means the little girl, who is now nearly seven, essentially leads a double life.

She has a different set of rules for each house which she occasionally uses to her advantage, jokes her stepmother.

"Sometimes it slips out that she's not allowed to do something at her mum's, but we haven't established that rule yet, so she'll try to get away with it. You can't blame her!"

The girl's parents mainly communicate with each other by text and email.

Being able to talk courteously face to face about her care would make life easier and "more consistent" for the child, says her stepmother.

"I think I would actually agree with her mother more than her father on some things... It's sad for her that she can't be as free as she could be. Sometimes she'll say, 'I won't tell mum about this' and I think 'gosh, she's so little'. At her age I shared anything and everything with my mum."

Despite the angst involved in building a step-family, the rewards more than compensate, the woman says.

"It's really quite beautiful what she brings into our lives. I think we create something special when the three of us are together. She said to me the other day, "I'm lucky my dad found you!", and at times like that my heart just melts."



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