

## The Role of Stepparents in Child Custody Disputes

ANTHONY E. ATWELL, MD  
URSULA S. MOORE, LCSW  
CARLA S. NOWELL, PHD

Divorce has become a part of the fabric of an ever-increasing number of American families. Few extended families are untouched by its ramifications. In many families of divorce, boundaries are redrawn and relationships are redefined. Frequently, remarriage imposes yet another complicating factor for the members of the new families. Visher and Visher<sup>1</sup> have defined "stepfamily" as a family in which at least one of the adults is a stepparent. There are no well-established norms for behavior among these new family members. While there may be potential for enrichment of family relationships and expansion of family support systems on the one hand, on the other hand new relationships may threaten family members because of the lack of defined roles, unanticipated problems, and expectations of conflicting loyalties.

Divorce entails more than just a return to an unmarried state. Especially when children are involved, marriage is not a fully reversible operation. Divorce does not magically undo the ties that were established during the marriage. When children continue to need to have relationships with both parents, they force the divorced parents to maintain some relationship with each other. Lack of agreement between the divorced parents on the nature of their continuing relationship vis-à-vis their children leads to conflicts over custody and visitation. Introduction of one or more stepparents may further complicate matters. Several studies have addressed the nature of adjustments between children and stepparents. Some report findings of no significant differences in the behavior of children in reconstituted families when compared to children in biologic families.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Others suggest that the outcome for children living with stepparents is much less favorable.<sup>5,6</sup> One author<sup>7</sup> identifies factors in the relationship between the stepparents and their stepchildren that lead to disruptions in the family. Another author<sup>8</sup> concludes that the age of the children in reconstituted families is not a factor in their relationship to the stepparents. This study, however, only surveyed the children at the time of parental separation and remarriage.

Increasingly, blended families (that is, families including stepparents, children from previous marriages, and children from the present marriage) are a reality in American life. There is a need to further explore the potential positive and negative ramifications of step-relationships. There can be

---

Dr. Atwell is Director, Child Custody Center, San Jose Hospital, San Jose, California, and Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University Medical Center.

Mrs. Moore is Chief Psychiatric Social Worker, Child Custody Center, and Senior Clinical Social Worker, Stanford University Medical Center.

Mrs. Nowell is Staff Psychologist with the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Inpatient Services, San Jose Hospital.

multiple types of role definitions within these blended families that have positive outcomes as well as many that can be conflict laden and destructive for all family members. It is useful to consider factors contributing to an individual's motivation and the nature of the relationships among family members in these reconstituted families. In this paper, we shall explore the roles and relationships of stepparents with their current spouses, with both ex-spouses, with their own children, and with their stepchildren during the time of custody and visitation disputes.

Many of our observations are based on experiences with families seen in the Child Custody Center over the past seven years. The Child Custody Center uses a multi-disciplinary team model of evaluating and mediating custody and visitation disputes. The approach is to obtain extensive individual histories from parents, stepparents, and children, as well as to observe interactions among groups of family members. We also draw upon extensive experience in treating individuals and families in various stages of divorce and remarriage, in the context of inpatient and outpatient settings. Obviously, difficulties arise in defining a positive outcome depending on which family member's point of view is considered. We focus our assessment of outcome on what appears to be in the best interest of the child.

The motivations of stepparents to include children of their spouses' previous marriages in the new households, and the types of role relationships they envision for themselves with these children can be very diverse. It is important to explore some of the patterns we have encountered among the various parents and stepparents because their interactions may precipitate or perpetuate productive or destructive cycles for the children. Motivations in these complex family interactions are very difficult to untangle, especially when the families are presenting themselves for evaluation to mental health professionals. On the surface, they want to present themselves credibly; at the same time, they have the underlying motive of wanting to prevail in the custody battle. A parent and his/her new spouse may not be ready to acknowledge certain aspects of their views. For example, a father may petition the court for a change of physical custody because he feels his ex-spouse is interfering with adequate visitation. His suit for custody may express his anger at his ex-wife. He may be making a strong statement to the court regarding his interest in the children and his fitness as a parent, yet he may not be actually ready or eager to assume responsibility for full custody of the children. Furthermore, a stepparent's motives and goals may not be altogether consistent with those of his/her current spouse — and may go unspoken. A stepmother may appear supportive of a custody suit in order to strengthen the new marriage, while actually feeling quite negative or apprehensive about the addition of the spouse's children to the household.

### **Positive Influences of Stepparents**

A stepparent's approach to custody issues may be related to his or her own values, goals and parenting, and may vary according to an individual's

circumstances. Each of these factors contributes to the stepparent's attitude, and each needs to be understood during assessment. In our experience, a positive influence can be more readily offered by the stepparent who has not had children prior to this marriage. These stepparents often encourage the biological parents to exercise their parenting roles with their own children. They act in areas delegated by their spouse, not in competition with either biological parent. In our clinical experience, we also have found many other highly competent stepparents who function well. They derive satisfaction from other areas of their lives, such as their jobs, and offer positive influences to the children. Their contribution is frequently in addition to what either biological parent offers. They serve the children more as positive adult role models than as parents. These contributions can include emotional stability, intellectual skills, and recreational interests. These stepparents are motivated to have their own lives run in a smooth, orderly, and conflict-free way, and they look for rapid and workable resolution of problems. Such stepparents tend to be secure and self-confident in their marriages and their work. They do not need to compete with biological parents for attention and affection from their stepchildren. In addition, they appear able to identify recurrent negative patterns of behavior between the ex-spouses, and, rather than compound these patterns, avert or diffuse them instead. Sometimes these stepparents are able to function as effective intermediaries between the ex-spouses. They demonstrate, for the children, obvious contradictions to the negative stereotype portrayed in fairy tales. Other authors have explored the myths and assumptions about stepparents, especially "the wicked stepmother." Radomisli<sup>9</sup> concludes that the image of the bad stepmother as a means of "splitting" the image of the "good" and "bad" parent is neither needed for the child's development nor accurate in reality. The stereotype, however, can impede the development of a normal relationship between the child and stepparent. Schulman<sup>7</sup> also finds that adjustment of reconstituted families can be complicated by the existence of certain myths and expectations that put undue stress on the family.

### **Problematic Issues for Stepparents**

By contrast, a stepparent may have what we consider negative motivations for encouraging his or her spouse to seek custody. For example, a stepparent may have his/her own agenda regarding the children, which may be unrelated to their needs or best interests. One variant that reflects negative motives is the stepparent who seeks custody of the stepchildren to minimize contact between his/her spouse and the other biological parent. Such stepparents are rarely supportive of contact between the children and the non-custodial parent. They frequently undermine the possibility of the children having positive contact with the other parent. Another variant is the stepparent who seeks to correct past parenting errors he/she feels he/she has made with his/her own children from a former marriage. A third variant occurs when an element of rivalry and competition between the stepparent and same-sex biological parent influences the custody and visitation issues.

A fourth variant can occur when a stepparent seeks to validate his/her spouse's "fitness" as a parent through pressing for custody. These motivations can lead to a variety of negative outcomes for the children.

### **Some Clinical Patterns**

A stepparent who is motivated to seek custody as a desire to minimize contact with the former spouse tends to want to erase vestiges of the previous marriage or distance his or her current partner from the former spouse. This strategy often includes elements of jealousy, feelings of insecurity in the new marriage, and a desire to exercise power or control. The stepparent may see the ex-spouse as maintaining undesirable ties to his/her current spouse through the children. This link may serve as an unwelcome reminder of the previous relationship to the stepparent and be experienced as a threat.

Custody of children often represents relative power in the relationship between parents when both parents want contact with the children. A change in custody, then, may represent a shift of balance to the stepparent's home, and he or she may seek it. For that reason, the stepparent can have a strong incentive to seek or retain custody. When the children reside with the ex-spouse, that home may be feared by the stepparent as a continued attraction for the non-custodial parent. In addition, the non-custodial parent may invest a great deal of energy in maintaining a working relationship with the ex-spouse. This may threaten an insecure stepparent who may seek to shift the balance of power through winning custody.

Some stepparents have, for one reason or another, relinquished custody of their own children at an earlier time and may now be highly motivated to validate their competence as parents through stepchildren. They may, for this reason, be the primary motivator for the custody suit for placement of stepchildren in their home. This can be beneficial or detrimental to the children. A stepparent who can recognize the needs of his/her stepchildren, sees them as separate from his/her own children, and communicates cooperatively with the children's biological parents while gaining satisfaction from the parent/child interaction, can provide a nurturing experience for the children. On the other hand, a stepparent may have idealized the absent children and have unrealistic expectations of the stepchildren. A stepparent who cannot focus on the stepchildren as separate individuals may not be able to respond to the stepchildren's needs. Demands also may be made on the children to meet the adult's expectations and needs. At times, disappointment with the stepchildren has led to their rejection and neglect. Sadness and guilt over not providing daily nurturance to one's own children can interfere with a stepparent's ability to form a warm bond with his/her spouse's children. A stepparent may ask, "How can I justify giving more of myself to my stepchildren than to my own children?"

Sometimes a stepparent is the prime mover in a suit for custody. Whenever the primary motivation for custody originates with the stepparent, one must assess very carefully the biological parent's own inclination

## ROLE OF STEPPARENTS

and feelings. The biological parent may respond to his/her spouse's initiative with compliance. The motivation of the biological parent may be to placate the new spouse or to prove his/her worth to the new spouse. For example, the stepparent may have a need to see the spouse validated as a "fit parent" by becoming the custodial parent. Furthermore, the biological parent may feel a pressure to prove his/her adequacy to the new spouse. This biological parent may have previously relinquished custody for sound emotional reasons of his/her own — and in the best interests of the children. Now this parent finds the previous decision questioned and not supported. This dilemma is especially great for women in our culture with its traditional bias that the only reasons a mother would not have physical custody of her children is that she is "unfit" or "uncaring." Clearly, this involves sexual stereotyping of parents that is neither realistic nor productive.

We have mentioned power balances earlier. We have found the circumstances of separation, divorce, and remarriage often intensify feelings of anger, loss, and wish to regain control, with the children becoming the pawns through whom these emotions are acted out. This can occur with or without stepparents. The presence of a stepparent, however, may further unbalance the relative power and status of the two natural parents. We have found that an unequal balance between the two parental households often adds fuel to the fire of disharmony. A stepparent can be central to the perceived power imbalance.

For example, one type of imbalance is an income differential between the two households. This affects the material advantages one parent can offer the children, and may leave the other parent feeling jealous and unable to compete. Contributing to this can be a stepparent providing a second income to that household. Differences in the amount of time spent with the children and opportunities to influence their interests and values may be envied and seen as a source of power. Further, when one of the two parents has remarried and appears to have established a satisfying new life, it may leave the other parent feeling disadvantaged and eager to compensate for this perceived inequity via attempting to gain custody. Resentment becomes even more intense when the stepparent is seen as the cause of the break-up of the marriage. All these contrasts add bitterness to custody disputes and increase feelings of hostility and unfairness, and stimulate the wish to regain power and control through custody.

**Case 1** A family we evaluated illustrates these points well. In this family, the divorce had occurred several years ago. The two now preadolescent sons had continued to live with their mother in her custody. Father had traveled the hundred or so miles from his home to visit them regularly twice a month. Meanwhile, father had remarried and established a middle-class suburban life. Mother and boys had a simple, casual, rural life. As the boys got older, the father wanted more time with them, in part because he felt he could better insure that their specific medical and educational needs were met. For a number of personal reasons, unrelated to the needs of the

children, the mother was unwilling to cooperate with his wish. She acknowledged being jealous of the father's ability to offer the children a variety of material benefits as well as educational and medical services she could not afford. She envied the comfort of his new life in comparison to her own relative poverty. Intensifying these feelings was the fact that the stepmother's earnings substantially boosted the father's already superior economic position. In addition, this mother had become increasingly isolated and depressed in the years since she initiated the divorce. It was painful for her to see her ex-husband's happiness in his new marriage. Another aspect of her rivalry with the children's stepmother centered on the stepmother's ability to interact with the children in an intellectually stimulating and mutually satisfying way, something this depressed mother could not manage to do. The combination of her rivalry with the stepmother and seeing herself in a disadvantaged position relative to the children's father interfered with her working flexibly with her ex-husband. It made her reluctant to allow him to have more influence on their children. This led to a bitter custody fight during which both boys became depressed, overly serious, and preoccupied with trying to meet their mother's emotional needs. This role reversal and the conflict of loyalties to which they were subjected represented major stresses for them.



When the stepparent also is seen as the primary catalyst for the break-up of the marriage, hostility and bitterness by the natural parent who was "left" can be overwhelming and can interfere with good cooperation between the parental figures. The parent who feels deserted is frequently unable to acknowledge his or her own contribution to the marital difficulties and break-up, and finds it much easier to project responsibility on the outsider. Often this bitterness interferes significantly with the abilities of the parents to communicate effectively, and causes numerous problems in issues concerning the children. The children are then placed in an untenable bind of conflicting loyalties, and they find it difficult to relate comfortably to any of the parent figures. The stepparent may become the scapegoat regardless of how much or how little he or she actually was involved in the difficulties between the parents. Anger may make reasonable cooperation between the two households impossible.

**Case 2** The negative effect on a child in this type of situation is illustrated in another of our families. This twelve-year-old boy was the eldest of three. Before the separation, he had a positive, involved relationship with his father. After his father had left the family and remarried, the boy became so overly identified with his mother and her anger directed at her ex-husband that the child refused to have any contact with his father. Positive overtures from the stepmother were ignored or deprecated. In this volatile atmosphere, even the most appropriate and well-meaning stepparent could not be expected to have any positive influence. In this family, the boy's symbiotic attachment to his mother intensified as her hatred continued unabated with

time. The real victim was the child who had no constructive, healthy relationship with any parent.

### Discussion

When there is general agreement regarding child-rearing practices and general life-style issues among the biological parents and stepparent(s), the children benefit from the consistency and mutual support of the parental figures. When one of the major parenting figures has differing values or ways of living, the potential for complications causing additional stress on the children is increased. The differences can be enriching or destructive to the children depending on how the disparities are presented and integrated. There can be a harmonious balance, beneficial to the children and experienced by the parents as mutually satisfying. There can also be chronic contradictions and/or conflicts over the "proper way to do things," placing the children in a confusing position in which they are forced to contend but unable to resolve.

We have observed that children placed in these binds display a wide range of symptoms from anxiety, depression, and withdrawal to overly aggressive acting-out behavior resulting from their insecurities and lack of clear and consistent limits and goals. These responses also vary as a function of the age and development stage of the child. In situations where the children are permitted to have positive ties to all parent figures, there exists opportunity for enrichment for the children, even when differing approaches are represented in the households. A range of models, skills, and experiences is presented to the children from which they can learn. This is likely to be most advantageous to children as they grow older and are better able to cope with the diversity of approaches and styles of the parent figures. Obviously, the enriching effect applies when the differing styles are potentially complementary rather than clearly contradictory.

The biological parents and stepparents share the responsibility for defining their new roles and building a workable relationship with one another from which they and the children all stand to gain.

### References

1. Visher EB and Visher JS: *Step-families: Myths and Realities*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1979
2. Bernard J: *Remarriage. A Study of Marriage*. New York: Dryden Press, 1956
3. Perry JB and Pfuhl EH: Adjustment of children in 'solo' and 'remarriage' homes. *Marriage and Family Living* 25:221-223, 1963
4. Wilson KL, Zurcher LA, McAdams DC, et al: Stepfathers and stepchildren: an exploratory analysis from two national surveys. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 32(3):526-536, 1975
5. Bowerman CE and Irish DP: Some relationships of stepchildren to the parents. *Marriage and Family Living* 24(3):113-121, 1962
6. Duberman L: *The Reconstituted Family: A Study of Remarried Couples and Their Children*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1975
7. Schulman G: Myths that intrude on the adaptation of the stepfamily. *Social Casework* 53(3):131-139, 1972
8. Palermo E: Remarriage: parental perceptions of steprelations with children and adolescents. *Journal of Psychiatric Nursing and Mental Health Services* 18(4):9-13, 1980
9. Radomisl M: Stereotypes, stepmothers, and splitting. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41(2):121-127, 1981