

Inclusion/Exclusion Issues in Stepfamilies

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LOSS AS A FACTOR IN EXCLUSION/INCLUSION PROBLEMS IN STEPFAMILIES

One way of understanding some of the problems which stepfamilies present is in terms of inclusion. Because stepfamilies are born of loss, inclusion can be a powerful issue that underlies presenting symptomatology. Loss of actual family members through death, loss of hopes and dreams through divorce, loss of important roles through changes in sibling order, loss of routines and patterns of family life – all create changes in regard to who is in the family and who is out, both physically and psychologically.

A noncustodial father is still in but he's in in a different way than when he was married to the children's mother. Whereas a new spouse is physically included but may feel quite emotionally excluded from his or her stepchildren. The children are in but their sibling order may have changed in the creation of a new stepfamily unit. This can create for them a loss of status and privilege.

EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION FANTASIES

Oftentimes, unrealistic expectations or wishes for a return to old realities color the ways in which family members in a stepfamily are included or excluded. The stepchild who is still grieving the loss of his parents' marriage may not be very interested in including his parent's new spouse in the stepfamily. The newcomer to a single parent headed household may frequently fantasize about what life would be like without the spouse's children in the picture. The remarried parent may sometimes wish that everyone in the new stepfamily would disappear and leave him in peace.

The fact that stepfamilies constantly shift memberships between two or more households can sometimes exacerbate each family member's secretive – or expressly proclaimed – wish to exclude some members of the family from the inner circle. Relief that children are finally going back to their custodial parent after an extended visit, that a stepparent is out of town, that an ex-spouse has moved to Australia, that a hypervigilant custodial parent finally stops calling three times a day when the children are visiting the other parent – these and other

feelings of relief occur in a frame of exclusion.

Sometimes the fantasy that the unwanted member of a family would simply disappear in a kind of permanent exclusion from the family unit begins to dictate behavior in the stepfamily. It then becomes an issue that colors everything else and, therefore, must be addressed before other issues can be resolved.

As with exclusion fantasies, unrealistic inclusion fantasies may color the nature of family life and must be addressed.

CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF INCLUSION/EXCLUSION PROBLEMS

Struggles for Power and Control

Members of stepfamilies may deal with inclusion/exclusion problems by struggling to control reality to fit with their fantasies. The stepparent may try to make the stepchildren love her (when there has not been sufficient time for love to blossom). The parent may withdraw love and affection from his spouse out of his anger that she is not showering his children with affection. A child may become oppositional and/or symptomatic as a way of gaining attention when he feels excluded from his parent's new marriage. The ex-spouse may suddenly file legal papers to modify child support out of his resentment with having to share his children with a new stepfather.

Therapists often help families negotiate agreements regarding structure and tasks in the stepfamily and find that new problems simply pop up elsewhere. This is a good clue that the content of structure and tasks is not the issue – that something more pervasive is in operation. Inclusion/exclusion feelings are frequently the problem.

Wishes to be included and feelings of being excluded are a good place to start. Questions such as "Who is closest to whom?", "To whom would you like to be closer?", "Who feels the furthest away from you?", "With whom do you think (another family member) would like to be closer or more distant?", and "How has the formation of the stepfamily made you feel closer to or more distant from other family members?" are good openers for such a discussion. The family's responses to such questions help the therapist formulate a kind of inclusion/exclusion map of the family.

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Wishes to be excluded or to exclude someone else are usually more difficult to address because these are frequently secretive. The stepmother who wishes her stepchildren would disappear from the face of the earth may feel ashamed or fearful of expressing this. Instead, she expresses it through trying to control the amount of money her husband spends on the children, the frequency of phone calls with his ex-wife, and the amount of time and attention he devotes to his "former" family. The stepchild who wishes her stepfather would go away and never come back may not state this directly but may demonstrate it by spending all of her time in her room or by rebelling against anything the stepfather asks her to do. Questions which normalize exclusion fantasies can sometimes give relief – "What kinds of normal fantasies have you had that everything would revert back to the way it used to be before the divorce and remarriage?", "How often do you wish that (stepchild, stepparent, ex-spouse) would vaporize into thin air and leave you alone?", "Do you feel that your wishes for your stepchildren to disappear are similar to what most stepparents feel or are they more intense?"

INTIMACY PROBLEMS

Struggles to control reality to fit with unrealistic inclusion or exclusion fantasies and feelings interfere with the intimacy that could develop in the presence of more reality-based expectations. If a stepparent feels supported, for example, by her spouse in her struggle to learn to love his children, she is more likely to feel close to them than if he pushes her to behave lovingly when she feels awkward and resentful in doing so. A child who is given permission to take her time in adjusting to the presence of a stepparent in her life is more likely to develop positive feelings for that stepparent than is a child who is "required" to act (and feel) loving. Feelings are simply not malleable to coercion.

When stepfamilies have been together for many years and their members are persistently hostile and distant from one another, it suggests that there have been power struggles over inclusion/exclusion issues that have never been resolved. This closes off all of the normal avenues for the development of intimacy and must be addressed in the therapy before any closeness is likely to develop. "Have you ever secretly liked your stepparent but didn't know how to express this feeling as long as you felt you were required to love him?" "How could you get closer to your stepchildren without the sense that your spouse has "won" in his constant pressure to force you to love them?" "Do you think you and your wife could have more intimate time together if you stopped monitoring time she spends with the children?"

CASE EXAMPLE

Jordan and Judy had been married nine years when they first presented for therapy. Jordan had been married twice before, with children from each marriage, and Judy once before with a son from her first marriage. Together, they had one son. Shortly after the marriage, Judy became overwhelmed with Jordan's attachment to his ex-wives and his children. She resented the emotional and financial energy Jordan poured into them and felt very much the outsider. The more she complained to Jordan, the more he maintained his connections to his ex-wives and children in his own struggle to maintain power and control.

Once Jordan and Judy had a son of their own, Judy retaliated by doing everything she could to shut Jordan out from his relationship with their son. The more she shut Jordan out, the more he attended to his ex-wives and children and the more excluded she felt. A vicious cycle was created in which everybody felt shut out. Eventually, Jordan's and Judy's son, Jason, became a major player in the drama, developing extreme behavior problems in school as a way of forcing his parents to get together in order to deal with him.

It was in response to this crisis that the family sought help. Initially, I tried to help Jordan and Judy arrive at some basic agreements for the management of their son's problems. This yielded temporary solutions but another issue quickly arose. Judy was furious with Jordan for the financial drain on the family caused by his excessive discretionary giving to his children by previous marriages. She complained that she had to scrimp and save in order to support his ex-wives and children. Once again, I facilitated some negotiations between the couple regarding the discretionary monies which Jordan allocated to his other families. As soon as this was settled, Judy's next complaint was that Jordan went on business trips and entertained customers in ways in which he would never conceive of entertaining her.

At this point, I asked Judy if she had ever felt included in Jordan's life and she tearfully said that she had always felt like an outsider. She had tried to make Jordan include her by trying to control the ways in which he related to his former families and then, when this failed, through the ways in which he conducted his business affairs. Nothing had worked. The harder she tried to make him include her, the more excluded she felt. Jordan then talked about the ways in which he had felt excluded from the present family as Judy undermined his relationship with his son. Both were in tears.

It was out of this discussion – and ones like it – that changes began to occur. As each heard the exclusion feelings of the other and realized that they had both suffered

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