

STEPFAMILIES

Providing Education and Support

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Reflections on Eight Years in a Stepfamily

by Kathleen Rolfingsmeir

A co-worker recently commented, "Oh, and I thought you were one of the success stories," when I shared with her that I had insisted my stepson move to his mother's house last month.

My friend remarried about a year ago and when the stepfamily difficulties surfaced, she shared some of her issues with me and another co-worker who had attended the support group offered by a local chapter of the of STEPFAMILY ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA.

Her comment rotates in my mind. "Are we no longer a success story because my stepson moved out?" I wondered. What is a stepfamily success story, anyway? Mark and I are still married and just celebrated our eighth anniversary. "Isn't that a success story?" I pondered. "Success for whom?" again I wondered.

When Mark and I married 8 years ago, we each maintained shared custody relationships with our former spouses. The three children spent one week with us and the second week with the other parent. The week that Mark and I were without children allowed for much couple time and bonding, an invaluable asset in those first few years. I had married a man with an only son whose wife abandoned them when Cort was not quite 5. For several years thereafter, Mark had residential custody and Cort's mother saw him at her convenience. Gradually, she

arranged for more time with Cort. During that period of time when Cort lived with Mark most of the time, they developed that kind of relationship that causes such a challenge for the entering stepparent. Mark became more Cort's buddy than his father. When I met Mark, Cort basically did what he wanted to do. Because of a roommate situation Cort slept in Mark's bed for years. On weekends, Cort was always with Mark. He never had little friends over from school - Mark was his friend.

When Mark and I began dating, Cort's resentment knew no bounds. He was a very angry child. When I met his mother during sports functions, I began to understand his anger. Understanding didn't alleviate the difficulty in receiving his angry behavior. One night, for example, Mark and I arrived home from a date to find the baby-sitter in tears. "I'll never baby-sit for that boy again," she sobbed as I drove her home.

I recognized that Cort's mother has some serious behavior problems that were affecting Cort and his father. In retrospect, it seems that the wisest course for me would have been to make a graceful exit. But being a great believer in people's capacity to change, and in therapy, I marched right on. I convinced Mark to take Cort to therapy. Mark and his ex-spouse also did therapy to resolve their unfinished business. Mark and I attended pre-marital counseling. We also

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Judith L. Bauersfeld, Ph.D.



I've been thinking of writing this column for quite a while. I believe that all of you who have read the President's Message for the last few years know of my commitment to SAA. And while I have from time to time mentioned the names of other committed Board Members in a variety of contexts, you probably don't know them as well as you know me. While you have read of some of them in the Board Bio Column, there are others whom you may not know and should. So I've decided to use this column to tell you just a bit about your fearless leaders, my tribute to their hard work and continuing devotion to the cause.

I have long and wonderful memories of Gloria Clark who has been a Pittsburgh pal for many years. As Chair of the Chapter Development Committee, Gloria is involved with the growth and health of SAA Chapters across the United States. Interestingly, her friendship has enhanced my own personal growth and health. Emily and John Visher are the founders of SAA and I can only thank them again and pay tribute as I did last month when I told the SAA story. We must all continue to carry the torch, remember the mission and tell the story, as there are growing numbers of stepfamilies who need the assistance that SAA has to offer.

I met Kay Pasley at the Wingspread Conference in Racine, Wisconsin. It was so long ago that I cannot even recall the year. Kay is a researcher and author specializing in issues related to divorce and remarriage, and the only person I have known or read who can articulate and interpret stepfamily research into practical usage for clinicians. Kay is Secretary of the Board. Craig MacPhee has opened his home to SAA Board members on many occasions. But as important as his hospitality has been, his loyalty and concern for SAA and its financial position has always been his primary task. Craig has served SAA as Treasurer for many, many years - for that we are grateful.

I met Sally Corwin-Osgood at the stepfamily conference near Houston. During some down time we sat in the sun with

our feet up - we looked out at the water (was it a pool or a lake - who can remember) and talked of family, SAA, children, SAA, as the sun warmed our bodies and our souls. Sally, a regional representative from Arkansas and Ohio (don't ask) rarely misses a SAA meeting.

Thank goodness I met Scott Browning, SAA's Clinical Chair at the Wingspread Conference. Scott has become valuable and essential to the educational component of SAA. We've been through some very amusing times together.

Lynn Haspel has taken the SAA Quarterly publication to new heights of professionalism. Just when we think the quarterly is at its best, Lynn exceeds her previous standard. I think Lynn and I met in Oklahoma City (or perhaps New Orleans) sometime long ago. I remember both meetings very well - I just do not recall where it was that I first knew that Lynn was very special.

Anne Bernstein is currently a member of the Clinical Review Committee but I remember Anne from long ago. As past Clinical Chair, Anne raised the standards of the Counselor's Corner in the Quarterly publications, making certain that each article was of the highest quality.

Our new President (her term begins January 1, 1998) is Marge Engel and she is superbly qualified for her new position. You will get to know her fine qualities in the months ahead - she will lead and guide and position SAA for the millennium. Please get to know her as I have over the last eight years. You will be impressed!

Before I close, there are the groups of Board Members whom I have not mentioned, but are integral to the operation of this organization - members at large and regional representatives. Our organization could not operate without these two groups of motivated, engaged and loyal Board Members. Space restrictions prevent individual name recognition, but please know that SAA could not reach its goals without all of you.

I'll see you in Philadelphia in my new role as immediate past President. This has been one heck of a ride! □

STEPFAMILIES

A Publication of The Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.

Editor: Lynn Naugle Haspel

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REFLECTIONS ON EIGHT YEARS IN A STEPFAMILY

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attended the stepfamily support group for three years. At one point in our families development, the five of us participated in family therapy with the two counselors who had seen most of us either individually or in pairs.

I read and read again STEPPING AHEAD and found it most helpful. I identified our stages of development as we grew. We watched for progress. We used family meetings weekly to plan activities and negotiate household issues. We instituted a "family contract" method of discipline with input from the children and this worked quite well in clearly documenting expected behaviors and consequences for cooperating or not. We received this suggestion at the stepfamily support group and encouraged others to try it also. Each parent set aside time to have dinner with his stepchild once a week or bimonthly. Progress was clear.

During the third year of my marriage to Mark my ex-spouse suggested that we try one daughter living in each house full time instead of the shared custody arrangement we had for 6 years. The girls were not averse to this for several reasons. Kate had started school in our neighborhood and therefore had friends near us. She got along well with Mark, Shauna did not. Shauna started school in Bruce's neighborhood and got along better with his wife than did Kate. For six months, this provided a unique arrangement as Cort was still with his mother every other week. Sometimes we had Kate alone, and sometimes we had Cort alone. Those times I remember as being exceptionally pleasant. One weekend per month we had all three and usually did some fun family activity.

Of course, nothing remains the same, and within six months we had Cort living with us full time as well as Kate. I believe he couldn't bear the idea that Kate had more time around his dad than he did.

Shauna lived full time at her dad's home for 2 and a half years. During this time her relationship with her stepmother steadily deteriorated. Bruce worked more than 50 hours per week and consequently was not available to Shauna much. Bruce and Karen were both adamantly opposed to counseling of any sort. Shauna cried and complained about how Karen treated her, but I never really believed her fully until some of the neighborhood mothers told me that Karen was really quite unkind to Shauna and obviously favored her own children.

Bruce agreed to let Shauna live with us full time the summer of her third year at his house. I then convinced him that it was time for both girls to live full time with Mark and me. We settled for minimal child support to "rescue" Shauna from their home, and he reluctantly agreed. Mark and I returned for supportive counseling as the stress increased with all three children living with us full time. If I griped to a friend about the difficulty in carving out "husband and wife time," she would often comment. "Well, now you're just like a regular family. The rest of us have our kids full

time, you know."

But a stepfamily ISN'T a regular family. While all couples need time to nurture their relationship, it seems doubly important for couples in stepfamilies. There are stronger forces at work to pull this couple apart than there are in most nuclear families.

For the subsequent six months, Mark and I still had every other weekend to rest and "repair." Then the bomb dropped. Shauna refused to go to Bruce's house any longer stating she just could not tolerate her stepmother. The counselor recommended that we not force her to go. We agreed with the recommendation.

Precisely 6 months later, Mark's ex-spouse wrote him a letter in which she accused Mark of turning their son into a woman hater and stated she would not have Cort to his house every other weekend. He was 14 at that time.

Since then, for the past two years, Cort and Shauna have been with us "24/7" and Kate almost as much because of her father's frequent absences from home on weekends. Our couple time is drastically reduced and much harder to arrange. Because of the work and sport schedule of three adolescents we have little time to enjoy any family activity for the five of us simultaneously. The stress of having a 16, 15 and 14 year old in the house sometimes feels overwhelming. My health has deteriorated significantly.

Three months ago, after months of wrangling with 15 year old Kate and hearing, "I don't have to do what you tell me; I can do what I want; I'll go live with my dad," I helped her pack and dropped her on her father's doorstep one evening. Her father "enabled" her and sabotaged our efforts to maintain certain standards of behavior. We've decided to let her live at her dad's for the two remaining years of high school and are praying that it's a good decision.

Three weeks ago I was ill and asked Cort to go to the pharmacy for me. He refused. After eight years of living with his behavior which ranged from openly hostile in his youth to the evident passive-aggressive and disrespectful behavior, his refusal was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. I told my husband that I would no longer live with this boy. Consequently, he is with his mother for the summer with a plan of therapy for two months and a re-evaluation before school starts again.

Shauna, not surprisingly, has been acting out. We are all, with the exception of Kate, back in counseling. I imagine we'll pay off the counseling bill by the year 2020 or so. We reassure each other, "adolescence won't last forever; this too shall pass." But I still cry too much.

As to the question of the success story, Mark and I are still married, still sharing the same bed. We each continue to commit daily to work toward the health and happiness of all our family members. Isn't that a success story? ☐

The Role of the Stepparent: How Similar are the Views of Stepparents, Parents, and Stepchildren?

In the increasing voluminous literature of stepfamilies, there is one area of widespread agreement: The quality of stepfamily life is very much related to how the role of the stepparent is carried out. However, despite this widespread consensus, we know very little about how members of stepfamilies think about the role of the stepparents and how it should be performed. In addition, we lack information about how consistent stepparents, parents, and stepchildren are in their views of the stepparent roles. Although we would expect that it would be helpful if stepfamily members had consistent views of the stepparent role, no studies that I know of have tested this possibility.

A STUDY OF MISSOURI STEPFAMILIES

To explore how stepfamily members think about the role of the stepparent and how consistent they are in their views, Larry Ganong, Marilyn Coleman, and I conducted a study of 40 stepfamilies in Missouri. In each stepfamily, the stepparent, parent, and one stepchild between the ages of 10 and 19 completed a series of questionnaires on the role of the stepparent. The stepfamilies were generally middle-class and had been together for some time – the stepparents and parents had been married for an average of 5.3 years. Seventy-eight percent of the stepparents had been married before and all of the 40 parents had been married before. In all cases, the marriages terminated because of divorce (and not the death of a parent).

One of the questions that we asked all 3 members of the stepfamily was to describe their ideal way that the stepparent should relate to his or her stepchildren. Possible responses were distant relative, teacher, friend, stepparent, acquaintance, advisor, boss, parent, uncle (or aunt), enemy, or other. All family members also were asked, with the same possible answers, to describe the label that best described the current relationship between the stepparent and stepchild. Because most of the responses were either parent, stepparent, or friend, we combined all responses other than these three into an “other” category.

HOW DO STEPFAMILY MEMBERS VIEW THE ROLE OF THE STEPPARENT?

Our results showed that parents and stepparents generally thought in fairly similar ways about how the role of the stepparent is being performed and how it should be performed; however, stepchildren had views that were quite different than those of their parent and stepparent. With reference to how the stepparent role should be performed, about half of the parents and stepparents identified “parent” as the ideal stepparent role; “stepparent” and “friend” were each chosen by less than 25% of parents and stepparents. By contrast, 40% of stepchildren identified “friend” as the ideal descriptor; only 29% identified “parent” and 18% identified “stepparent.” With reference to stepfamily member’s views of how the stepparent role is currently being performed, parents and stepparents again had similar perceptions. Most identified the current relationship as either that of “stepparent” or “parent” with 69% of parents and 73% of stepparents identifying one of these two labels. By contrast, only 56% of stepchildren selected one of these two labels; 44% of stepchildren selected either “friend” or one of the “other” categories.

To gain even more basic information on how stepparents viewed their role, they were also asked if they considered themselves to be stepparents. Interestingly, twenty-five (62.5%) indicated that they did, while 15 (37.5%) did not.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH STEPFAMILIES

Several noteworthy patterns emerged from our results.

FIRST, parents and stepparents both appear to think of the stepparent role – both how it should be carried out and how it actually is being performed – as that of “parent.” Combined with the finding that almost 40% of the stepparents in our study reported that they did not consider themselves to be stepparents, it appears that adults in the stepfamily believe that the stepparent should act much like a parent does in a nuclear, first-marriage fam-

ily. This is consistent with what numerous stepfamily scholars have noted, in that the adults in our study seemed to be trying to construct their stepfamilies in their image of the first-marriage family. One of the questions we are now trying to answer is whether there is a cost to the stepfamily. For example, we are now examining whether members of stepfamilies in which the adults view the role of the stepparent as that of a "parent" are less (or more) satisfied with their family lives than are those in which the stepparent role is thought of as a "stepparent" or some other label.

This information may have important implications for those professionals who work with stepfamilies; if there is indeed a cost to trying to mold one's stepfamily into a nuclear family, as other scholars have suggested is the case, professionals would be well advised to counsel stepfamily members to attempt to shape their families in ways that are more sensitive to the distinctive features of stepfamily life than is the nuclear family model.

SECOND, in contrast to the views of parents and stepparents, stepchildren seemed to believe that the stepparent should not play the role of a parent in the stepfamily. Almost one-half of the stepchildren reported that the stepparent should function as a friend to them. In addition, they were more likely than parents or stepparents to label the stepparent role as something other than a parent. Thus, it appears that stepchildren have views of the stepparent role that are somewhat different than are those of their parents and stepparents, whose views are generally similar.

It is perhaps not surprising that the adults were more in agreement with each other than they were with the children, because the adults are the most likely pair to have discussed with each other what the stepparent's role should be, and they are the most likely pair to periodically discuss how the stepparent is functioning in the role. Through such discussions, parents and stepparents are likely to have influenced each other's perceptions of how the stepparent role should be carried out and how it actually is being carried out. In addition, it is also possible that teenagers in general, and not just in stepfamilies, hold different beliefs than adults about how parents should and do act towards them. In other words, it is possible that adolescents in single-parent families and first-marriage families, like their counterparts in stepfamilies, also believe that parents should function less like "parents" and more like "friends" to them.

Nevertheless, because the different views of stepchildren have the potential to disrupt stepfamily functioning, it may be helpful for professionals to encourage discussions between the adults and stepchildren regarding the appropriate role for the stepparent. The goals of these discussions would not necessarily be consensus regarding the appropriate role for the stepparent, but a greater understanding of the expectations and beliefs that each stepfamily member has about how the stepparent and the stepfamily will function.

A THIRD PATTERN evident in our results is that there is no clear consensus on what the best role is for

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We Care About What You Think!

The Stepfamily Association of America depends on you, our constituents, for support in a variety of areas. One of the areas that has previously been neglected is your opinion on what is happening in our association. The *Stepfamilies Quarterly* is the best arena for this kind of dialogue between the national office and our readers. Therefore, the next issue of *Stepfamilies* will contain our new feature, **Reader's Response**.

For this column to be a success, however, we need your participation! In every issue, we will ask for your opinion on a specific article regarding current information or trends concerning stepfamilies. In the following issue, we will print all, or portions of, your responses. Submission of letters will imply consent to print unless otherwise stated. □

Our **Reader's Response** article for this issue is **Research Update – The Role of the Stepparent: How Similar are the Views of Stepparents, Parents & Stepchildren?** on pages 4, 5 & 7. Responses to this article should be received no later than December 1, 1997.

Please submit written responses to:

Reader's Response
Stepfamilies Quarterly
650 J Street, Suite 205
Lincoln, NE 68508

COUNSELOR'S CORNER

Scott Browning, PhD
Chair, Clinical Committee

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and the purpose of the Counselor's Corner. As the new Chair of the clinical committee I assume responsibility for this column. First and foremost, it is very important that Dr. Anne Bernstein's work as the previous chair be recognized. Dr. Bernstein contacted some of the finest clinicians who were interested in working with stepfamilies and motivated them to write about therapy. Many of these back issues are still available to families or clinicians who would like to review some of these articles. Anne is expected to still contribute to this column, so although she has taken on new professional responsibilities, her knowledge and insights will continue to be available.

The question that has been difficult to address is the target audience for the Counselor's Corner. Is it meant to be read by clinicians in helping them in improving their clinical skills in order to assist stepfamilies? Or, is the column best used to inform stepfamilies about therapy? The Stepfamily Association of America has begun to address these issues by instituting some changes in our approach to training professionals. We now see that part of our mission must be to train clinicians in the techniques and nuances of therapy with stepfamilies. The stepfamily is a unique family form that deserves respect for its difference.

The first step has been to establish a status within the organization called the Professional Affiliate. To date 120 clinicians have been approved. The screening procedure determines that the individual can meet specific professional credentials and can verify training in treating stepfamilies. The names of these individuals can be received through the central office of the Stepfamily Association of America.

Additionally, SAA has created a training series in order to increase the knowledge base of professionals working clinically with stepfamilies. The training series is comprised of a Level I and Level II model. Level I consists of an up-to-date symposium on research and meaningful clinical applications. The nationally recognized speakers address the following: basic stepfamily dynamics, research, children in stepfamilies, the developmental model of stepfamilies, the couple, stepparent and stepchildren issues and co-parenting concerns. Level II has a more specific agenda dedicated to training clinicians in effective stepfamily therapy. Live demonstrations and case consultations create an intellectual training experience. The next training institute will be held on October 31 - November 1, 1997 in Philadelphia. These brochures are available through the SAA central office.

One new aspect of the Counselor's Corner will be that each column will have a brief foreword identifying the primary audience for who the piece is written. It is very like-

ly that counselors will still get a great deal from the pieces identified for families, and *visa versa*, however, it is preferable for an author to have a specific target audience in mind.

Among the topics to be covered in the upcoming columns which will be geared toward stepfamilies are the following: (1) How to be a smart shopper when seeking out therapy?; (2) Chapter meetings: Are they an adjunct or replacement for therapy?; (3) What do you do if therapy doesn't seem to be working? In addition, we are very interested in hearing your questions and concerns about therapy. If your stepfamily went to therapy, is there some information that can be shared that would help others who are following your path. Any letters that we receive will be carefully edited to remove identifying information. Please send this correspondence to SAA: The Counselor's Corner.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT STEPFAMILY THERAPY

1. When is the best time to go to therapy?

The time-line regarding Stepfamily Therapy might begin before the new family does. In the formation of the stepfamily the interest in pursuing therapy often occurs prior to the marriage. The couple may come in so that they might prepare for some of the critical issues that they fear may arise early in the new stepfamily. On the other hand, therapy is usually sought after troubles have started. Both systems can be successful, but there are traps in either approach.

A prevention model (going to therapy prior to the formation of the stepfamily) has the advantage of preparing the couple to anticipate possible problems and create new patterns that may change the nature of the interactions. In addition, there are significant tasks that need to be addressed early in the stepfamily, and a therapist familiar with those tasks can assist you on making those decisions regarding finances, discipline, time-management and emotional traps. However, as good as prevention can be, it is impossible to predict all of the variables that might affect a stepfamily in formation. Having not prepared for particular issue while in counseling might create a sense of frustration. If you do attend pre-marriage counseling please don't assume that additional counseling would signal a failure of your early efforts.

Seeking therapy for your stepfamily after problems have begun to surface has the advantage of providing the family with an apparent goal; the removal of the problem. This may offer a focus with which the therapist can directly intervene. However, it also follows that once a problem has started the family is more agitated and frightened which

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COUNSELOR'S CORNER

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can produce peculiar behavior in and of itself. So rather than simply treating the stepfamily and their presenting problems, late-onset therapy is often fraught with fears of divorce, fatigue and historical/personal issues.

2. Who should come in to the session?

This question is not uniformly agreed upon even by individuals who are very well trained in stepfamily therapy. My opinion is that there is a primary issue to be resolved in the intake which can make answering this question easier. The question being how volatile is the family? If the relationship between either parent/stepparent and child/stepchild is so contentious that an argument is likely in the office, I prefer to meet with the couple first. A stepfamily, in my opinion is often fragile; to subject them to hostile battles in the therapist's office is frequently not healing.

3. Is there anything I should find out from the therapist before I contract to start with her or him?

In research conducted by Drs. Emily and John Visher and Dr. Kay Pasley, "the most important factor is that the

therapist has knowledge about the unique nature of stepfamilies."

Just being a trained therapist or even a family therapist is not sufficient. You have a right, as a client, to ask if the therapist has done any special training in working with stepfamilies. This question does not mark you as a "squeaky wheel," but rather, a concerned member of a stepfamily who does not wish to be teaching the therapist about stepfamilies.

There is no guarantee that therapy can assist a stepfamily, but fortunately therapy has been found to offer stepfamilies a forum to learn about the nature of stepfamilies, increase their coping skills and improve their problem-solving skills, all factors that assist stepfamilies. Remember, you are welcome to request a list of affiliates from SAA. These therapists cannot be directly endorsed by SAA, but they have been screened and are aware that stepfamilies present unique needs.

Good luck and please feel free to comment about the Counselor's Corner. Your opinions are important to us. □

RESEARCH: Role of the Stepparent

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the stepparent to play in the stepfamily. As the percentages presented earlier show, no one single answer was endorsed by a majority of stepfamily members as the label for the way the stepparent should function in the family. This lack of agreement is very consistent with the claims of many who study and work with stepfamilies, who have suggested that the stepparent role is ambiguous in our society. Stepparents and parents who think about and discuss the nature of the stepparent role (and not all of our stepparents and parents did have these discussions) do not have much guidance from messages and images they receive from the media, entertainment, educators, and even their friends and other family members.

Because not all stepparents and parents had discussed their expectations and beliefs regarding how the stepparent should behave in the stepfamily, an obvious implication for professionals is that they should encourage the adults in the stepfamily, with input from the stepchildren as appropriate, to share with each other their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings regarding the stepparent role. A desirable outcome of such discussions might be that the adults reach some level of agreement regarding their views of how the stepparent

should carry out his or her role in the stepfamily, despite the lack of such consensus in our society.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study has provided some initial information about how stepparents, parents, and stepchildren think about the role of the stepparent and how consistent they are in their views of how this role should be and is carried out. In the future, we will continue examining how stepfamily members view the role of the stepparent and, perhaps even more importantly, the kinds of role perceptions that are related to healthy and satisfying stepfamily functioning. Our goal is to provide stepfamily members with some research-based guidance on different ways that stepparents can contribute to healthy and well-functioning stepfamilies. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mark A. Fine is Professor and Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He is a noted scholar in this area, a member of the Research Committee for SAA, former-editor of Family Relations, and editor-elect for the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.

Chapter Sisterhood: Stepfamilies of Pittsburgh & Pittsburgh-South Hills

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is a city with a metropolitan population of roughly 2 million, and we are fortunate to have two SAA Chapters serving stepfamilies in the area.

There are many advantages to having more than one stepfamily chapter. California has many in one area; Minnesota and Nebraska could also tell you of the benefits of multiple chapters. More is definitely better.

Wilma Wolfenstein and I started our group in 1981. When Heather Newman-Trivus called in 1991 with the news that she was starting a new chapter in the South Hills we were overjoyed to be able to refer stepfamilies in that area to her meeting. It also provided the option of another night of the week for people with work or babysitting constraints.

We've always had a relationship of collaboration, not competition. Right from the start Heather was like an energetic sister, someone to share group concerns with and bounce new ideas off of. We've exchanged "pulpits" occasionally when one or the other was out of town.

Both chapters welcome members from the other group who on occasion want two meetings a month or can't attend their usual group. These exchanges are refreshing and bring new viewpoints to both groups. It is an antidote to burnout to have this kind of support and camaraderie.

We've spoken jointly at hospitals and to corporate in-house education groups. We also share speakers from one group to another. We're publishing a joint newsletter which is mailed to mental health professionals as well as to chapter members.

We've had social gatherings and outings that include people from both groups. Last fall we worked together to organize a joint evening with Elizabeth Einstein when the University of Pittsburgh brought her to Pittsburgh for a seminar.

Having a sisterhood like one we've enjoyed with the South Hills chapter has enhanced both groups and provides ideas and mutual education to continue to grow. □

RETURN

By Myrtle Archer

I'd thought it lost to me forever,
The flame country,
The autumn-blazed country,
Its spires of red; its heights of yellows,
Its hillsides bright with flame.
But I was home again, young again.
Sweet memory sang.
My bright eyes feasted.
The vivid proof glowed here,
There is a second chance,
There is renewal.

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BOARD BIO

By Lynn Naugle Haspel on behalf of SAA

Judith Bauersfeld

AU REVOIR BUT NOT GOOD-BYE

It is not hard to write about Judith Bauersfeld. It's just difficult to find adequate words of praise to express our gratitude for her years of dedication and leadership. She has been the president of SAA for the last 2 years but that's not all. She has been president twice as well as held almost every other office that the Stepfamily Board of Directors has. That doesn't count all of the other hours she has dedicated to our organization. How fortunate we are to have been the recipients of her tremendous energy and devotion.

When I asked Judith just how long she had been a member of the board she couldn't remember but "a long time." she said. Before she joined the board she was active in her native Pittsburgh, PA support group. That began shortly after 1975 when she married Dr. Richard Bauersfeld who had 2 children and Judith also had a child. She recalls that being in a stepfamily was her most challenging endeavor. "There was such a scarcity of good information about stepfamilies back then," she said.

Career choices often emanate from personal need. This need for answers propelled her into going to graduate school to become a therapist. She states she was looking for solutions to problems of divorce and remarriage. Along with her graduate school education she discovered the Stepfamily Association of America. This began an enduring twenty year relationship between Judith and SAA and the people who make up our organization. Upon receipt of her PhD, she practiced psychotherapy in Pittsburgh with a specialty in Divorce and Remarriage until 1993.

That year brought another change, a move to Scottsdale and another career. Judith became Executive Director of Make-A-Wish Foundation of central and southern Arizona, a position where she could remain active in the lives of families and children. She never

missed a beat, continuing to work tirelessly in her "spare" time to help promote the Stepfamily Association of America.

What else do you say about someone who has always been there, caring, dependable, thoughtful, dedicated, energetic and wise. Judith will no longer be president after the October board meeting but she will continue to have all these characteristics which has made her a great leader and a great friend. Here's to you, Judith, we know you won't be far away and we are grateful.

So *au revoir* but not good-bye! ☐

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

By Larry Kallemeyn

Over the past year I have been pleasantly surprised at the commitment of those involved with SAA to give of their time, money and expertise. In the grand scheme of things SAA continues to be a small organization with the same struggles many small businesses face.



There continues, however, to be a strong desire to find out new and better ways to reach stepfamilies who need our support. I believe that strong sense of mission and purpose is the direct result of the commitment shown by John and Emily Visher who founded SAA. As you read this issue you will note that the Vishers are being recognized by the Association of Councils as the recipients of the NCFR\`97s Distinguished Service to Families Award for their work. I can think of no one more deserving of this recognition and award. Please join me in congratulating John and Emily on this award and in saying thanks for their efforts and commitment to stepfamilies across the country. ☐



STEP WRITE UP

by Rick Harper, M.F.C.C.

Dear SWU,

I'm new at this stepparenting stuff and I'm not sure it's for me. My girlfriend, Dana, and her four year old daughter, Francis just moved in with me. Dana says, "Don't worry about it, Mike, you'll catch on."

Francis is a nice little kid, I guess. She seems pretty normal to me. I mean she gets into about the same stuff every little kid does at her age, including myself. She gets on my nerves sometimes when I'm tired after work. But, you only have to tell her to settle down once or twice most of the time and she does.

Dana and Francis can argue with each other for ten minutes about the littlest thing. Running through the house is an example. Yet at other times, Dana ignores Francis when Francis is coloring on the walls. That's when I feel like I'm supposed to do something. But, I don't know what to do. Referee? Break it up? Take sides? What?

Sometimes, I feel like the only thing Francis ever hears me say is "no, don't, cut it out or quit." How about some basics for a 26 year old bachelor "stepfather?"

Bachelor Adult

Dear Bachelor Adult,

The first thing I can tell from your letter is, "You've got great instincts," which is a major plus. Although, there do seem to be some gifted people when it comes to dealing with children, many aren't parents. Most of us get better only through what I call, "trial and effort."

Since your position in this little family group is somewhat uncertain, I recommend the role of "caring adult." As part of the adult coalition, you and Dana need to coordinate your efforts. You can do this by coming up with a definite set of rules and agreeing upon a set of consequences and rewards to go with them. Take the opportunity to involve Francis in developing her rules, rewards and consequences. Making a list of rules and posting them with drawings by Francis can go a long way to establishing their importance.

Once you, Dana and Francis have worked out this starting point, the name of the game is consistency. You can't get everything you need to know in an article, but, there are some basic guidelines for establishing a relationship with a child and the beginnings of manageable discipline.

- 1) Consistent rules are the best rules.
- 2) Rules a child helped draft are easier to follow.
- 3) Rules with related rewards and consequences are the only "real" rules.
- 4) Children will do anything to get what they want, even behave.
- 5) The fewer rules the better.

I think the first guideline, "Consistent rules are the best rules," is the cornerstone upon which you build trust. We all want to know where we stand. Even if we do not like a rule,

we want to know where the boundaries are so we can maneuver without any surprises. For example, I may crowd the line, if I do not think it's a fair rule, but I still want to avoid disaster.

The second guideline, "Rules a child helped draft are easier to follow" has two significant advantages: a) The rule is more likely drafted in terms the child understands and b) the rule carries the authority of co-authorship. For example, if you and Francis establish the rule, "Toys are to be put back into the toy box before you can go out to play," Francis not only understands the problem when she wants to go out and play, she also has a ready solution. She helped establish the means to get what she wants. Having a poster in Francis' room drawn by Francis depicting her picking up her toys followed by a picture depicting her playing outside smiling makes the rule so definite even the Supreme Court could not overturn the rule or argue about it. This is why I recommend young children draw a series of poster-like pictures detailing all major rules. It can be fun and a continuing family project to reinforce the positive rather than the negative.

Third, "Rules with related rewards and consequences are the only 'real' rules," not only stresses the issue of consistency again but also highlights the need for rewards. Rewards are the positive reinforcement for desired behavior. The desire for praise is stronger than the desire to avoid punishment. We all want attention and prefer love and kindness. However, if the only attention we get is negative when we misbehave, we will take what we can get and pass it on.

Fourth, "Children will do anything to get what they want, even behave" is the key to understanding healthy, constructive rules, and guidance. Instead of saying "no" all the time, you can offer Francis an acceptable means of getting what she wants. For example, since Francis can't color on the walls, where can she color? You might offer her some scratch paper, coloring book or old shopping bag to color? Try inviting Francis to sit next to you while she colors, if she does it quietly. Be sure to praise her and don't forget to review Francis' art work when she works quietly for a few minutes. The more frequently she receives praise and attention, the more she will trust in your alternative to coloring on the walls as well as your judgment in general. No matter what age, when we are rewarded for listening, our hearing automatically improves.

Fifth and perhaps the easiest to relate to as an adult is, "The fewer rules the better." Are you aware of the tax codes? Need I say more?

There is nothing magical about knowing how to treat children. Just think back to your own wants and needs as a child and see if you can duplicate the positive things you remember and improve upon the things you felt were unfair.

I highly recommend regularly scheduled "family meetings." Many families tell me one evening a week after dinner works. Family meetings work when they are based on the

Continued on page 11

STEPFAMILIES FALL 1997



BOOK REVIEWS

Margorie Engel, M.A., M.B.A.
President Elect

Living in a Stepfamily

(Second Edition). 1994. Ruth Webber. Australian Council of Educational Research.

Split Ends: Teenage Stepchildren

(paperback and audio tape). 1996. Ruth Webber. Australian Council of Educational Research.

After researching and writing the entry on world-wide divorce issues for the Women's Studies Encyclopedia being published by Harvester Wheatsheaf in England, the light bulb went on over my head. We at SAA should take a look at how other countries are addressing the needs of stepfamilies and the type of resources and references they provide.

Barbara Barber, who lives in Edithvale, Australia, met with stepfamily members and therapists in the Boston area when she attended a workshop at MIT. She referred me to the program, *Living in a Stepfamily* by Ruth Webber. The Australian Council of Educational Research forwarded copies of Ms. Webber's material including the leader's manual for the second edition of *Living in a Stepfamily* and a paperback and tape for teenage stepchildren titled *Split Ends*.

Ruth Webber, Head of the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Administration at the Australian Catholic University and a stepparent herself, has conducted research into the dynamics of stepfamilies and has led programs for stepfamilies and counselors. Responding to the requests from a range of community welfare agencies, she developed *Living in a Stepfamily* to be a program that is relatively unprescriptive and takes a practical approach.

Aside from the British/Australian spelling of words such as "organization" and references to "access parents" where we would say "noncustodial parents," Australian

stepfamilies grapple with the same issues as their US counterparts: stepfamily dynamics and clarifying boundaries and roles. Our SAA materials, *Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead, Learning to Step Together: A course for stepfamily adults* and the *Stepfamily Workshop Manual* cover the same ground. The universal aim is to present a positive approach to stepfamilies by showing what works rather than what has gone wrong.

Dr. Webber's work shines when she tackles the issue of teenage stepchildren – not so surprising when I learned that she completed her doctoral thesis on *"Adolescents Living in a Stepfamily."* I have found no comparable books or tapes in our country. There are no simple solutions for helping teenage stepchildren understand stepfamily life but there are a range of options that other teenagers have tried and found to have worked for them. With an abundance of examples from Divided Loyalty, Access [visitation], Being Invaded?, Gaining Freedom, and Frustrations and Annoyances to Giving It a Go, *Split Ends* talks *with*, not *at*, teens. That is a great deal to accomplish in a single book.

The tone of *Split Ends* is matter-of-fact and positive; it is also richly sprinkled with cartoons. I particularly appreciated the emphasis on encouraging teens to build good will instead of blaming their unhappiness on being in a stepfamily. As one Australian parent noted, *"I wish my six kids had been able to read this book before I plunged them into a stepfamily."* Agreed. We have all learned that the ability to make stepfamilies work is not luck.

STEP WRITE UP

Continued from page 10

"Ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" theorem. The idea is to give everyone including children the chance to give and receive praise, encouragement, participate in family business, as well as the sometimes necessary, review of who's been naughty and nice. This is also the best forum for updating rules, rewards and consequences. Interactive meetings with even the youngest getting a say seem to make everything more meaningful.

I am a believer in the teacher rather than police officer approach to raising children and support the "It takes a village to raise a child," concept. Right now you are part of Francis' village and have much to offer. Remember everything matters. So, don't be afraid to say you're sorry or admit when you are wrong. You can help Francis accept her own awkward pursuit of maturity by enjoying your own.

Expect Francis to act like a child. She will not disappoint you. Continue looking at the details of what works and what doesn't, expect to make missteps along the way and you can't go wrong. Lastly, a sense of humor is like emotional glue, so relax and make it fun. □

NOT EVERY BOY HAS TWO DADS

By Kathleen Hammer

Editors Note: *Out of the many stepparent adoptions that occur every year, there are a few that can be considered special not only because of the exciting event itself, but because of the special support from the families of the absent parent.*

When the phone rang that afternoon, I paused before answering. I was unsure of what I should say to Beth after leaving the message on her answering machine, saying I wanted my husband, Pete, to adopt my son. I didn't know how she would feel about the idea of her son giving up his rights to her grandson. But I wanted to let her know what we were thinking.

So I picked up the phone.

After saying our hello's and how-are-you's, she got right to the point. "I think you have a great idea. I think Pete should adopt Nik, because Pete is raising him. Nik and Pete both deserve the stability an adoption offers them, and I know Jon will want what's best for Nik too."

I sighed with relief, but then started wondering why she would agree so easily. I hoped that she wasn't trying to back out on seeing Nik. Yet, again she assured me by telling me that she still wanted to be a part of Nik's life, and that she hoped we felt the same. I promised her that was our intention.

"And, I will pay for the adoption."

Her offer surprised me because I had assumed it was our responsibility to pay, and I had expected her to respond by saying she would fight an adoption, not pay for it. I was ready to go into debt to pay for the down payment for the lawyer, and all of the court costs we would incur. But Beth, caring first-hand for her grandson's welfare, was sincere in her proposal, and the following week she called me with her lawyer's telephone number.

Beth added, "They said they will do the adoption, and they want you to set up an appointment to talk to them. I've already made arrangements for the payment."

When I called the office they were quick to set up an appointment, and the following afternoon we were able to see the lawyer.

She explained the process for us, and had us fill out some forms. She told us about the 'guardian ad litem' who would visit us at our house, and explained that Pete would need to have a criminal record check.

Then she told us about a problem: she wasn't sure

that they could represent me, because they had represented my son's biological father in his child support case. We were told it would be a week or two before she would be able to let us know. First, of all Jon had to sign a release form so that they could represent me in the adoption of our son.

The lawyer explained that she had never had a situation where the mother of the biological father paid for the step-parent adoption. No one in her firm had ever had to get the permission from one of their clients, to let them represent their client's 'rival' from a previous court case, much less had the parent of the client paying for the new case. The lawyer explained that we would have to make up the rules as we went.

Two weeks later we got a phone call from the firm, informing us of Jon's signature on the needed form, and telling us when the 'guardian ad litem' would be coming.

After a nice visit with the 'guardian ad litem,' and a clearance on Pete's background check, we were back in the law office, speaking with the legal secretary.

She wanted us to sign some forms, allowing them to file for a new birth certificate for Nik. I hadn't expected to have to change anything except his last name, but they told us that we could only have one father on his certificate.

I hadn't been prepared to erase Jon's name from Nik's birth certificate. I had gone to court to get Jon's name on the birth certificate, and I did not want Nik to lose that right to his identity. I expected to put both names on the certificate.

But the legal secretary told me that usually adoptive parents want the original certificate sealed, and wanted to be the only parents listed. They had never dealt with a situation where the biological father's family was so directly involved. However, after a couple of phone calls, the secretary said that we would have to go with only Pete's name on it.

We broke the news to Beth later, who told us that although she was unaware of that policy, that she was okay with it. She suggested that I keep the original one for Nik when he is older. Jon's identity as Nik's father had never been a secret from him although there hadn't been a great deal of interaction between them.

Months went by as our lawyer filed to get us a date in court, and dealt with other paperwork. Then we were on our way to the courthouse.

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THE STEPFATHER'S ODYSSEY

By Philip Stoddard

It's 3:00 A.M. early Sunday morning. With suitcase in tow, I bring up the rear as my wife and stepdaughter make their way to one of the large chartered buses. As a middle school student, Amy is about to embark on a trip with her class to Washington D.C. All about me are other families excitedly waiting the signal to board; for them this is a time to share in the anticipation, to give one last hug as their son or daughter scrambles up those steps. My heart aches to be a part of this send-off for my own stepdaughter. How I want to hug her, to tell her again how much I love and care for her, how elated I am that she can embrace this opportunity. But hugging is reserved only for family members – the mother, son, and daughter into whose family I've married. Nor will there be one word spoken to me by Amy this morning. For eight months now, shortly after her thirteenth birthday, Amy has staunchly maintained her silence toward me.

I purposely lag behind, fumbling in my pocket for the bon voyage card I had bought. I want to be able to give it to her personally, but I know the awkwardness and hurt feelings that would arise. So I slip it into an outside pocket of the suitcase, knowing that Amy will eventually discover it. Within me there is an overwhelming sense of joy for Amy as I think about the grand time she will have. There also abides a deep, heartrending sadness as I contemplate my own inability to reach her.

I remember when Amy first brought home the information on the trip, and I was confronted with a total cost of slightly more than \$1,000. My knee-jerk reaction was to say, "No, way." My wife explained that Amy was just gathering information. Later when I learned that almost the entire cost could be earned as a bingo volunteer, I avidly threw my hat into the ring. Over a period of several months I donated a bright red apron and pedaled pulltabs in a smoke-filled room.

Amy's determination, however, has been to continue to exclude, to steadfastly maintain her distance. And it has been my determination to respond with love and acceptance and to model for her a loving, intimate union

with her mother. My journey has been a mixture of joy and sorrow, hope with times of despair. I feel alone as I walk this pathway, oftentimes misunderstood, but walk it I must. Persevere I must! Perhaps someday I will reach home.

"She drew a circle that shut me out,

But love and I had the wit to win;

We drew a larger circle that took her in."* □

* Quote adapted from *Apples of Gold* compiled by Jo Petty, The C.R. Gibson Company, 1962.

TWO DADS

Continued from page 12

I was pregnant with my second child, and my big stomach limited the room on the court bench. But we still managed to fit Nik, Pete, my father and his girlfriend, and even the two children I baby-sat, all together. It was a room full of love, and there were many hugs and kisses, a lots of pictures taken that day.

The judge shook our hands, and hugged Nik, and even stood next to us in her robe so we could take pictures. It was a wonderful experience, and afterwards we all exchanged gifts.

The festive atmosphere was permeated by the feeling of love and respect that we all had for Beth, who had made the whole adoption process as positive an experience as it was. It was an unusual situation to have the adoption paid for by the parent's family who was relinquishing the child. But over the years we will always know that it was the best situation for our son and everyone involved.

Nik says it best when he tells people, "I am a lucky boy because not everyone has two dads." And the circumstances of his adoption reflect that sentiment. □

Emily, John Visher Receive Distinguished Service To Families Award

Emily, Visher Ph. D. and John Visher M.D., co-founders of the Stepfamily Association of America, are the 1997 recipients of NCFR's Distinguished Service to Families Award.

The Award, sponsored by the Association of Councils, recognizes exceptional national or international leadership or service in improving the lives of families. It carries a \$1,000 cash gift and plaque which will be presented during NCFR's annual conference in Arlington, VA, in November.

The Vishers have been members of NCFR since 1982 and live in Lafayette, CA.

Nomination materials describe them as major influences on stepfamily clinical practice and education... their work has taught and nurtured a whole generation of family scholars and educators.

They founded the Stepfamily Association of America (incorporated in 1979) as an advocacy organization to provide education and support for parents and children in stepfamilies. They have trained hundreds of clinicians in the U.S. and abroad to develop the knowledge and skills to address the clinical issues in working with stepfamilies.

They also have written extensively on the subject of stepfamilies. Their first book, *Stepfamilies: A Guide to Working with Step-Parents and Children*, was published in 1978. According to the publishing company, Brunner/Mazel, it was the first professional treatment of this increasingly widespread phenomenon and was instrumental in training many thousands of professionals over the years...it is not exaggeration to say that this book established the concept of stepfamilies as a special type of family with its own characteristics and its own problems that required differentiated treatments adapted to the special needs of these reconstituted families.

The Vishers published three more books, *Old Loyalties, New Ties: Therapeutic Strategies With Stepfamilies*, *How to Win as a Stepfamily*, and in 1996, *Therapy with Stepfamilies*.

They also developed *Stepping Ahead*, a manual used throughout the U.S. and translated into several languages. *Stepping Ahead* outlines the realities of stepfamily living and provides a series of exercises that stepfamilies and practitioners can use to negotiate the challenges of the lifestyle.

Several nomination letters noted the value of their books and scholarly articles, citing that they ...changed the way that researchers and clinicians think about stepfamilies and how to assist them, and that they have taken an interdisciplinary approach to the study of stepfamily(ies)...

One professor wrote, "I know that I regularly use their work as a foundation for my research; when the Vishers write an article or a new book...I acquire it as quickly as I can because I know that I will gain new insights from reading it."

The Vishers' contributions extend beyond their writings. One nominator noted that they have taken their message to public policy makers. For example, they served as consultants to the American Bar Association regarding recommended changes in the legal system to accommodate stepfamilies. They spearheaded the effort that resulted in recognition of stepfamilies through the celebration of Stepparents' Day each October in California.

Communication has been an overarching part of the Vishers' careers. They have been committed to facilitating networking to encourage and facilitate communication between practitioners and researchers in this area, a nominator wrote. They look to research to inform prac-



Emily & John Visher

tice and have been strong supporters of the connection between these two, often separated groups of professionals. Their combined energy, enthusiasm, and unfailing commitment to making the work respectful of and knowledgeable about stepfamilies is contagious.

They have also been credited with observing and documenting change within American families. One nominator noted, We all know that families change with the pressures put on them, and that pressures today are far different than the pressures of two or three decades ago. The Vishers have been right in there monitoring the change and helping people adapt to it.

Nominators also noted that the Vishers have defined the stepfamily enterprise in the U.S. ... both are tireless in their efforts to educate professionals and the general public about stepfamilies. Their efforts to remove the stigma so long attached to divorce and remarriage has been crucial to depathologizing stepfamilies and focusing on positive functioning and normal stepfamily process.

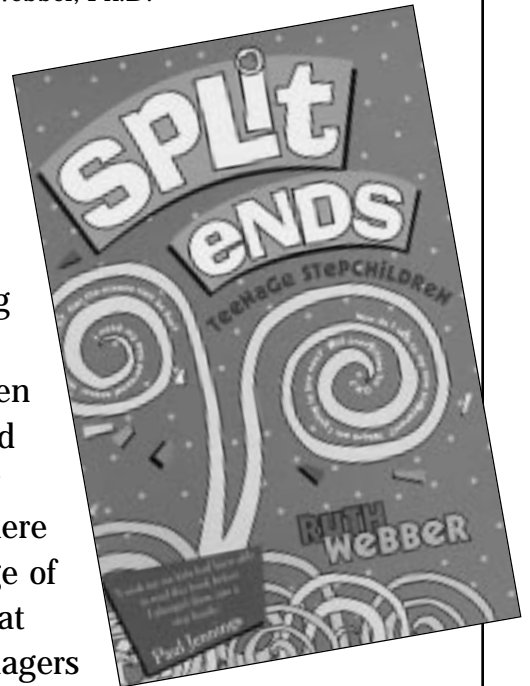
One nomination letter noted that the Vishers have supported, encouraged, cajoled, and been cheerleaders for anyone showing interest in stepfamilies. Without their exceptional leadership and service, stepfamilies would continue to be understudied, pathologized, and ignored. There is no one alive today who has defined a field within family studies to the extent that John and Emily Visser have defined the field of stepfamily study. They have become legends in their own time, and they are truly deserving of the Distinguished Service to Families Award.

Reprinted courtesy of the Affiliate Connection - June 1997 issue.

Split Ends

by Ruth Webber, Ph.D.

There are no simple solutions for helping teenage stepchildren understand stepfamily life, but there are a range of options that other teenagers have tried and found to have worked for them. With an abundance of examples, **Split Ends** talks with, not at, teens.



Themes: teens; divided loyalty, visitation

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