

Through the Lens #4

On Step Parenting
Roberta M Gilbert, M.D.

RL writes:

*I have just finished Dr. Gilbert's book, *Extraordinary Relationships*. I was briefing my 18 year old stepdaughter about the principles Dr. Gilbert describes, and she asked me about how stepfamilies figure in the patterns Bowen described, as well as how to understand her family of origin configuration. I replied that I would do some digging to answer her questions, as she piqued my interest as well. I look forward to sharing anything I may learn from you.*

Thanks so much in advance, R. L.

Dear RL,

Your question is an interesting one because not much formal research or writing has been done in this area. However, there are so many step parent relationships in our society that most Bowen theory consultants will have encountered quite a number of step families in the course of their careers. So there has been an ongoing kind of informal research going on for many years. It would be most useful to plan a conference on the subject and publish the papers so consultants could make their rich experience and thinking better known.

A few of my own thoughts about this vital subject follow:

Spending time together is all it takes to form an emotional unit.

I don't think anyone knows how much time it takes, but we can be sure that people who live together spend enough time with each other to form an emotional unit fairly quickly. So everything we have learned about emotional units applies to stepfamilies as much as to any other. That is, they create fusions—borrowing and lending selves—among each other. These fusions are a big part of the definition of an emotional unit.

Fusions create anxiety and over focus.

Fusions involve giving up of self for some people in the family and don't, therefore feel good to them—they create anxiety. Sometimes it is the children that end up giving up more self, and thus, carrying more anxiety. Sometimes it is one of the parents.

How stepchildren are viewed by stepparents and also parents may intensify focus, creating problems.

In a group, anyone who is different or perceived as so, can draw focus and thus end up with more off-load of family anxiety and immaturity. A stepparent is at risk for seeing the

stepchild as different, and then worrying about him or her, or going to the opposite end of the spectrum and seeing him or her as excessively wonderful and special. It doesn't matter whether the focus is negative or positive, it grows out of fusion and tends to create even more focus, adding to the load of anxiety for the child and stifling individuality (differentiation of self). Any small life difficulty may be magnified by the focusing step parent or other parent, adding to the vicious worry/fusion cycle.

However, all parents are subject to some degree of over focus on their children, depending on their degree of emotional maturity. Fusions and over focus are certainly not unique to step parents.

If we could view each child equally, without anxiety or over focus, there would be fewer problems.

Often, and in story, step relationships are fraught with negative reactivity and difficult, problematic outcomes. The legends add to any difficulty one may have in viewing one's role or the child with a clear head.

In nature, in primate species where alpha males take over a group of females and their offspring, the new alpha male often kills off offspring who are not his at the beginning of his tenure.

In spite of all this, every clinician knows examples of people who say, "My stepparent was the best thing that ever happened to me!" At certain levels of differentiation, it is possible to do one's step parenting in a way that is useful to both the children and indeed, the whole family. Consultants know examples of step parents who helped the whole family step up in functioning. A professional woman told me that she would never have gone as far as she did in life were it not for her stepfather's influence. He provided, in the context of an interested, involved relationship, encouragement and support that were optimal for her development. Of course, this grew out of his relationship with her mother that worked well also.

How can we lessen the focus?

An attempt, often with coaching (the coach can often see what we cannot) to catch ourselves over-focusing on one or more kids in the family can, over time be extremely useful. Once people see their patterns they often know what to do about them. At that point, to concentrate on our own functioning in our primary relationships—those with our spouses, and our own family of origin—will constitute a step up and out of the focused child fusion.

Optimally, that would be a part of a larger effort at differentiating more self out of all one's systems, one's family of origin and one's nuclear family and even other systems such as the workplace. Much has been written about this.

At what age did the children come into this family?

Children who come into a stepfamily as babies or toddlers will spend more time there and everyone has longer to accommodate to all the relationships and relationship triangles than offspring who come in as grown ups. Those who come in as young children may, as adults, never remember a time when they were not in this family as it is configured now.

On the other hand, step relationships with older or adult offspring, while they would be expected to be less formative, can become extremely important. One sees a spectrum of

negative, over positive, and “just right” relationships. The “just right” ones, though have usually taken years and much effort (in both the parent/child relationships as well as parent/parent relationships) to get to that point.

The parents of every family—step or not—are its leaders.

Parents set the emotional and intellectual tone for the family. If they have a fairly mature working relationship with each other, that will be reflected in the present and ultimate maturity level of the children. If the kids aren’t getting along with each other it usually means the parents have a little work to do on their own relationship.

Parents are well advised to avoid the temptation to cut off from former spouses where offspring are involved. They will need to work on that relationship too, just because cutoff of important relationships is a good thing to avoid, but also in order to coordinate all the details, principles and challenges of child rearing.

Where a parent has died, high functioning families I have watched have worked at keeping the memory of the dead parent alive, as well as his or her special legacies. These families have also kept in contact with the dead parent’s side of the child’s family, often putting forth great efforts to do so. I have watched all these efforts contribute greatly to the development of high functioning, well-adjusted offspring of a parent who has died.

All families are grounded in the bedrock of their generations.

This very basic tenet of Bowen theory results in lots of guidelines: keeping in contact with living relatives, having one-to-one relationships with as many family members as possible, being present and accounted for in family crises and at family events, are all a part of the picture of higher level family functioning. Allowing children time to be with their non-custodial parent and in all the generations on that side of his or her family (yet not forcing the issue) becomes important.

If parents have an active, meaningful relationship with their parents and living relatives they are more likely to have the same kind of relationships with their children. And they are more likely to pass on these important ways of thinking and behaving to their children. Grandparents and other relatives who are actively involved can be a wonderful balancing force in a nuclear family at risk for an over-focus.

The “problem” step child

Sometimes children react intensely negatively to the arrival of a new “parent” who is not really their parent. They may show negative behavior or other kinds of symptoms. Some guidelines for the parent in this situation are the same as for parents with any kind of family symptom:

- Keeping one’s eye on differentiation of self—focusing on one’s marriage and own family relationships helps to avoid an over focus that can intensify symptoms.
- These reactions are usually short-lived and will subside if people keep on course with their own goals for more maturity and constantly watch self-management.

- Allowing the child enough time with and free access to the non-custodial parent, as well as that parent's family, not interfering with those relationships but encouraging them, will go a long way to help the child adjust to the new situation.
- Refusing to triangle the child into intensities with one's ex partner is useful to everyone. After all, one wants children to have good relationships with "all" his or her parents and step parents. It is in everyone's best interest.
- Not using the child as a messenger or go-between to the ex partner.
- Keeping one's gift for humor in the picture, making time for play and fun can go a long way to lessen the negative intensities in any family,, restoring a sense of proportion and balance .
- Many research studies have now shown the value to families of spiritual practices such as prayer and church attendance.

Stepparents and stepchildren need room to figure out their relationships.

There is magic in the triangle where one parent can step aside, be emotionally neutral, less anxious and simply let the other two figure out what kind of relationship they are going to have. Although this is an important precept for managing self in many triangles, it is especially so when older children come in. These relationships may need lots of time and space—as well as a natural parent managing self well in the triangles (interested and involved, not passive, but showing confidence in their ability to work it out).

In summary, all the principles for parents found in Bowen family systems theory are just as useful to step parents.

The most important difference between natural and step parenting is the emotional intensity and negative perceptions that can become attached to the job. If the leaders of the family, the parents can manage their own intensities with each other and with their offspring, though, staying in good contact with their generations, keeping both eyes on differentiation of self, there is no reason why stepfamilies can't meet and surpass any and all of their challenges. ♦

Written in 2009

See Bowen, M *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Aronson, New York 1978

Also see Gilbert, R, *Connecting With Our Children, Guiding Principles for Parents in a Troubled World*, John Wiley and Sons New York, 1999

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: rgoffice136@gmail.com.