

# Session 18

## In 'step' – living in a 'joined up' family

### Objectives

- To enable parents to explore the challenges of living in stepfamilies.
- To remind parents that they have already learned the skills that will help them do their parenting jobs more effectively.



### Handouts

- > **Handout 18-7**  
How are you doing?



### Session Plan

- Introduction
- Getting in touch – our own experiences
- Three different job descriptions
- How can a parent cope?
- DVD
- Practising being effective
- Checking on progress



### Key points for parents

- Very many young people in the UK grow up in stepfamilies.
- It can easily take up to ten years for a new family grouping to 'settle', so family members need to hang in there and not give up too soon.
- The incoming adult in a stepfamily has the weakest bonds with other family members.
- Everyone in a joined up family is likely to feel vulnerable.
- All family members must be given a chance to think through and share their expectations about new and changing situations. This needs to be done on a regular and ongoing basis.
- Parents need to set time aside to spend with each individual family member, which includes taking adult time together if two partners are involved.
- If parents can remember to use all the skills and strategies learned in Part 1 of the *Take 3* course, they will be able to deal with most problems that arise.
- In particular, they need to take care of themselves, use their best active listening skills, sort out their expectations and boundaries, avoid getting hooked into the drama triangle, use 'I' statements and hold regular negotiation sessions, using choices and consequences.
- If things get too tough, parents should seek support for themselves.



## Notes for facilitators

Being part of a stepfamily – or 'reconstituted' family – is usually a complicated and emotionally demanding experience for everyone concerned, whether or not they are physically living together. Given that four in ten marriages in the UK are remarriages for at least one of the adults, and many unmarried adults are involved in serial relationships, we think it is important to include a session to allow parents to think about some of the issues involved.

It's not always easy to find the correct words to describe these family situations, so for ease of reference we shall refer to *stepfamilies*, meaning a broad mix of 'joined up' families. We will use the word *step-parents* to mean any adult involved in the family set-up who isn't a birth or adoptive parent.

You would of course only choose to run this session if most of the parents in your group were involved in some sort of stepfamily. Alternatively, you might want to run a special session for these parents. Several sessions would be needed to fully explore all the various situations that parents might find themselves in, particularly if they are dealing with acrimonious separations or divorces, so this could be seen as a taster session.

As in the other sessions in Part 2 of this pack, the main aim is to apply and practise the skills and strategies learned in Part 1. In our experience, in order to deal with the challenges of their parenting 'jobs', step-parents need to have all the strategies from the *Take 3* course at their fingertips, and to be able to use them fluently and skilfully – and then *more so*. We need to remember everything that adolescents are going through, all the uncertainties involved in discovering their identities and their own boundaries, and the stressful feelings that can arise in families during this process. If, on top of all that, their parents' relationships fall apart, and separations (or other bereavements) take place, the adults involved also feel insecure and come and go, and step-siblings appear, then those stressful feelings multiply and can become more painful or even run completely out of control.

Parents need to understand the vulnerability of all those concerned in a joined up family. In particular, they need to realise that when a new partner joins a ready made grouping of parent and child (or children), it is usually that incomer who is in the most precarious position, who has the weakest links to the others, and so who is, in one sense, the most vulnerable. All the members of a stepfamily are likely to experience intense feelings, including those of jealousy, fear of abandonment, anger and isolation.

Sometimes people have been taught that it is wrong to feel jealous, and you may need to 'out' jealousy and point out to parents that it's



a feeling like any other feeling in the sense that it's totally normal and justifiable. By using active listening, parents can help young people identify, name and then express their feelings of jealousy or fear. They can then help the young people discover the needs they have that are not being met. They may also be able to help them find ways of meeting those needs. All adult relationships can also be helped if the two partners learn to use active listening with each other, but step-parents in particular may really need to develop this skill to help cope with the stresses of the new family situation.

It may be useful to point out that it can take a very long time (perhaps ten years) for a step-parent to become assimilated into a family, or for two families to 'join up' successfully. Parents who imagine that everyone will be fine in a few months may be very disappointed. Also, some will have to face the fact that the happy new family of their dreams may never come about, or at least not in the way that they imagine; further difficult adjustments may need to be made. These realisations could help parents to feel more hopeful (if relationships are taking a long time to settle down) or could fill them with despair, but it's important that they are in touch with reality. Often the thing that depresses us most is our unmet expectations, but if we assess the feasibility of those expectations it may help us to face up to reality.

In order to cope, step-parents need to maintain a high level of self-care. Most of us find this difficult when family life is busy and demanding. Step-parents need to be very aware of boundaries, both their personal ones and those of the new family arrangements, and often none of these have been negotiated or clarified. They need to be skilled and empathic listeners, at a time when they themselves may be feeling confused, challenged or insecure. When different family traditions and cultures come together, people can get angry, confused and hurt. Step-parents need to make plenty of time available so that everyone concerned can talk through their expectations and make agreements. These agreements need to be regularly reviewed and renegotiated as new problems arise.

Parentline Plus (2005) provided interesting facts about remarriages and stepfamilies.

- It is predicted that by the year 2010, divorce, separation and repartnering will be the norm.
- Thirty per cent of callers phoning the Parentline Plus helpline talked about conflict between children and step-parents.
- Nearly 40% of calls made by step-parents concerned problems with setting boundaries for 13- to 16-year-olds.
- Stepfamilies are three times as likely to go to a GP, to be in regular contact with schools and to be known to the police.

- More than half of the divorced parents of children will repartner forming a stepfamily.
- Estimates are that at least 50% of remarriages which form a stepfamily also end in divorce, and that 25% of stepfamilies break down in the first year.
- There are around one million dependent stepchildren under 16.
- Many children live in more than one household, and around one million are having regular contact and visits with their other parent's new family.
- Around 30,000 dependent children under 16 are born into a stepfamily.

These figures suggest a lot of turbulence and instability in the lives of many young people, but we need to remember that stepfamilies can have positive aspects as well as negative ones. Young people have access to wider families and different family cultures, they have to learn to adapt which can stand them in good stead later in life, and parents have the opportunity to learn from past mistakes.

Family Lives (formerly Parentline Plus) has useful information for stepfamilies on its website (see references) and also produces a series of leaflets on step-parenting which can be downloaded. You might want to obtain some of these before you start to run this session.

In this session we also suggest you use the 14-minute animated DVD *Joined-up families* from the Leeds Animation Workshop (2003). The DVD looks in a humorous and entertaining way at some of the problems that may arise in stepfamilies. It shows families from a wide range of backgrounds dealing with communication, discipline and behaviour issues. It comes with an accompanying booklet that lists useful publications, helplines and other resources and contacts.



### Activity 18.3

### Three different job descriptions

The aim of this activity is to help parents realise the challenges for everyone involved in a stepfamily. People often find their own role so painful that they can't appreciate that other family members are also facing huge difficulties.

There are obviously very many variations and combinations of 'joined up' families that you could look at. The more adults and young people that are involved, the more complex the web of relationships becomes. We have chosen this situation because it is relatively simple to use as an example and because we come across it very often in groups. You might want to use a more complicated

case or one that is particularly relevant to your group, for example where two lots of stepchildren are involved in one household, or where parents are fighting over visits and access.

Think carefully about how you will divide the group: do you want people to be drawing mostly from their own experiences, or do you want them to be in a group thinking about a role that has never been their own? The other facilitators and helpers may also want to join in.

When facilitating the discussion about who should earn most, you may need to draw up some ground rules, e.g. one person is chosen to be the speaker for each group (they obviously need to consult with their group as they go along), or perhaps anyone can speak but the person speaking has something special to hold and no-one can interrupt them.



### **Activity 18.7**

#### **Checking on progress**

You will need extra copies of Handout 18-7 for parents to use at home.

**Activity  
18.1**

## Introduction

- 1 Welcome everyone and introduce the session topics and activities.
- 2 Explain that this session gives parents an opportunity to think about:
  - what family life is like for members of 'joined up' families
  - what kind of problems arise
  - how we can manage these problems effectively.
- 3 Introduce three points to remember about stepfamilies:
  - 1 The incoming adult in a stepfamily has the weakest bonds with other family members. The parent–child relationship usually predates the newer adult–adult relationship so the incomer is highly vulnerable. Of course young people may not see it that way – they may feel that they're the most vulnerable.
  - 2 A stepmother or stepfather can't replace a Mum or Dad. Parents need to understand that in order to help their young people.
  - 3 It can easily take up to ten years for a new family grouping to 'settle', so people need to hang in there and not give up after six months.

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**Activity  
18.2**

## Getting in touch – our own experiences

- 1 Ask parents to divide into pairs and to talk about their experiences of any of the following:
  - being a step-parent
  - being a birth parent and having a step-parent living in the home
  - being a birth parent who lives separately from their children
  - having a step-parent when they were young
  - any other examples of 'joined up' family life.

Ask them to think especially about:

- what is/ was good about the situation
- what is/ was difficult about the situation
- how do/ did they feel about the other people involved.

You might want to give them some examples to get the ball rolling, perhaps from personal experience. You could point out that each situation can be very challenging.

- 2 When they have had enough time to explore their feelings and share their experiences, collect their responses on a flipchart under different headings (e.g. parent, absent parent, step-parent, young person, etc.) and sort them into positive and negative. Invite comments.

**Activity  
18.3**

## Three different job descriptions

- 1 This activity follows on from Activity 18.2 and is designed to explore in more detail three different roles or positions in a typical stepfamily situation:
- the role of the resident birth parent
  - the role of the incoming step-parent
  - the role of the young person.

Ask parents to divide into threes and give each group one of the three roles to consider. Ask each group to use their experiences or their imaginations to draw up job descriptions on flipchart paper for their assigned role, bearing in mind the emotional challenges involved. For example:

- what skills does the person need to have?
- what rights do they have in their role?
- what responsibilities do they have, and who are they responsible to?
- how much free time or time to themselves might they expect to have?
- what might be the financial implications of the role?
- who can they turn to if they are finding their role too challenging?

- 2 With the whole group invite each group to present their particular job description. Facilitate a discussion to decide who, in this imaginary family, has the most challenging role and therefore needs to be paid the most. Remember to include emotional challenges as well as practical ones

To finish, ask parents what it was like doing this activity: did they learn anything from it?

**Activity  
18.4**

## How can a parent cope?

- 1 With the whole group ask parents to think back to what they have learned on the *Take 3* course so far:
- which skills and strategies would be useful for dealing with the challenges of stepfamilies?
  - how and when could they be used?
  - which might be the most important ones to use in a stepfamily situation?

In theory the material covered in Part 1 of the *Take 3* programme equips parents to cope with stepfamily life. For example, they have learned to:

- use active listening and empathy
- be assertive
- use 'I' statements
- look after themselves
- be aware of the drama triangle
- spend plenty of time with individual family members in order to connect, to check out expectations and to negotiate ground rules.

These are all vital skills, but sometimes parents find them hard to use when overwhelmed by the powerful emotions that stepfamily situations can evoke. Ask parents what might make it hard for them to use all these skills. What would help? List their ideas on a flipchart.

**Activity  
18.5**

### **DVD – *Joined-up families***

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- 1 With the whole group play the DVD and ask parents to comment on it, perhaps asking them to discuss their reactions first in small groups. Did they particularly relate to any of the parents shown? Did they get some new ideas from watching the DVD?

**Activity  
18.6**

### **Practising being effective**

- 1 The rest of this session can be used for working on parents' real-life challenges of living in a stepfamily. With the whole group invite everyone to think of a situation that they would like help with. List them on a flipchart and note where some of them have features in common. Taking one situation at a time:

- brainstorm ways of dealing with it, encouraging parents to think of the skills covered on the *Take 3* course
- help the parent(s) concerned to choose a strategy to try out
- set up a role play, involving each parent as themselves (or as their protagonist)
- let the parent try out their plan
- get feedback from everyone.

Let as many parents as possible take a turn. Derole after each role play.

**Activity  
18.7**

## **Checking on progress**

- 1** With the whole group give each parent a copy of Handout 18-7.
- 2** Ask parents to divide into pairs to score themselves on the handout.
- 3** Back with the whole group ask for comments. Suggest that parents use the handout to check their progress each week and give them extra copies to use at home.
- 4** Still with the whole group summarise everything parents have learned in the session and ask what changes parents plan to make.